

**THE
TYRANNY
OF
CERTAINTY**

by
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bismillahirrahmanirrahim

THE TYRANNY OF CERTAINTY

(An alternative muslim view of the Satanic Verses saga)

INTRODUCTION

So the Satanic Verses Saga is hotting up again, what with the impending paperback publication, a hysterical film on the subject, a new book due out from Salman Rushdie, and the approach of his first interview since the death threat, plus the Iranians still keeping the price on his head and continuing to call upon all British muslims to kill the man on their behalf.

Well, I am a British muslim, born here with the white skin of my race, the mongrel offspring of Anglo Saxon and Celt. Years ago, before the birth of many of the young lions parading in anti-Rushdie marches, I chose to try to live my life as a muslim, and as a British muslim I have now been asked to hunt and kill someone for writing a novel. I think a few questions are in order.

This Rushdie insanity has been going on for over a year now, and I keep waiting for some Hans Andersen child to leap out of the crowd and explain that the King has no clothes. As we careen rapidly further into Wonderland, it seems that in the absence of an outspoken child, I will have to attempt the job myself. I am aware of the pitfalls and dangers in this, not least that I will receive the same treatment as Salman Rushdie, but death is less of a threat than that I fail to serve God's purpose. Yet to do the job justice will take a long time, and the world changes so fast these days that by the time I have finished my effort may prove to have been wasted and my opinions seem irrelevant. But until the recent exploits of Saddam Hussein, the Rushdie issue overwhelmed all other aspects of muslim life, and much more than Arab feuds over oil and the haramain, the whole future of Islam as I see it depends on how we deal with the issue, so I really feel that I have to try to shed some new light on the subject.

Now I'm sorry to have to say it, but if we are to make any sense out of this and untangle the issues involved I will have to go right back to the beginning, that is before I read the book.....

Out of context extracts

It seems that the first demonstrations were started by an Indian politician trying to unite the muslim vote behind him, but I didn't hear that till much later. The first I heard of The Satanic Verses was murmurings in the mosque about some book insulting the Prophet. Then leaflets started to appear with pages photocopied from Impact magazine containing extracts from the book.

At first it seemed vaguely amusing, as the muslims were obviously having trouble with the English language. The extracts were clearly out of context and didn't mean what was implied, even to the extent of one quotation being headlined "Mahound...man or mouse", when in the extract "man or mouse" could be seen to refer to a completely different subject. The author apparently had no doubts as to his judgement with regard to the book's meaning, however, making bald simplistic statements of what the book was trying to say. Even without reading the book I knew it had to be more subtle and complex than that. Anyone who had previously read anything by Rushdie would have to have known that.

Book burning

I later discovered that this author's confidence in his understanding extended to inserting words into at least one extract which are not in the original book. This was presumably to "clarify" the quotation, but in actual fact was rewriting it to suit his own interpretation with no reference to the insertion.

In the weeks that followed, books were burned, and loudhailers were turned up to the full. Salman Rushdie appeared on TV to deny that he had written what was being so emphatically implied, but still "religious leaders" were allowed on the national news shouting their opinions as though they were incontrovertible facts. What a selection, some gentle and sincere despite being obviously deeply upset, some apparently moderate speaking of "misunderstandings" with regard to the content of the book, yet strangely reluctant to admit that the more rabid allegations might not actually be true. Some were barely capable of speaking English yet considered themselves more than adequate to decode this complex novel, some were almost frothing at the mouth in an apoplexy of rage, leading marches and burning down libraries.

Nonetheless, all these leaders had one thing in common - they claimed to speak on behalf of "Islam" and "The Muslims". In other words they claimed to be speaking on behalf of me. Who were these people who in the name of my religion wanted (and still want) to tell me what I can and cannot read? Am I really a part of the community they claim to lead? Do I get a vote? Are they somehow claiming authority over me? Are they claiming authority over what I can write? If I write anything that refers to matters Islamic, should I submit it to some Central Committee for the Certification of Approved Islamic Dogma? When I sit with a pen and paper toying with ideas are there some ideas with which I may not toy?

If that is supposed to be Islam I'm afraid I made a mistake and wandered into the wrong religion. I certainly didn't escape from the myriad christian clerics each claiming exclusive knowledge of the truth, to put my brains in the hands of any self-styled muslim clerics with even less understanding of my life experience than the christians. If individual muslims wish to surrender their critical faculties to those who enjoy their dependence, so be it, but when I follow the Prophet's advice and seek knowledge as far as China, I can assure you I will be extremely annoyed if the local muslims have just burned down the library because they thought it contained books they shouldn't read!

"Read: In the Name of your Lord who created, created Man of a clot of congealed blood. Read: And your Lord is Most Bountiful, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that which he knew not. (Quran 96.1-5)

Follow the leader

One of the most disturbing aspects of the case is not that less educated muslims were happy to follow the mosque campaigners telling them not to read the book. Perhaps they knew that their own English was not up to it and so were forced to trust the opinions of their chosen leaders. But it seems that the overwhelming majority of muslims were happy not to read the book, even those who were in a position to make sense of what was written and establish whether the muslim community was really dealing with the matter truthfully and justly. O.K., so it may have seemed to be a storm in a teacup at first, but surely some muslims must have been aware that the ignorant and unscrupulous depend on public apathy to gain the power to destroy rights and freedoms taken for granted by many.

"Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart - and that is the weakest of faith." (Sahih Muslim)

Then someone decided the Imam Khomeini should put his view across, and the ball was out of the park.

It is hard to make the case that the Ayatollah's statement was anything to do with Islamic law. Statements from Al-Azhar and many other Islamic organizations, made clear their opposition to this point of view. In fact, anyone who thinks that the Ayatollah could have spoken on behalf of all muslims is really living on another planet. He couldn't even speak for all the Shia. The death sentence was not a judgement but an opinion, to be accepted with whatever authority his followers accord him, that another man's writings made him dangerous to Islam. The defendant wasn't there to argue his case, so on what was this opinion based? It was based on someone else's interpretation of a book written in a language neither of them understood.

All this was set in a global view of overwhelming paranoia, quite understandable when one considers their recent history, under economic and military siege for years, a fully laden passenger plane Locherbied out of the sky by an American warship, and told they should be satisfied with "Sorry!". But just because they are out to get you doesn't mean that you're not paranoid, so Salman Rushdie was condemned to death for being perceived as the spearhead of a Western cultural imperialist plot.

Do muslims really believe that in Sharia law a perceived slander is the same as a given slander, even though the defendant denies it? Should a man be asked to apologise for something which he constantly denies having done? In English Law we are not allowed to ask if a man has stopped beating his wife, and if a man is prosecuted he must be allowed to plead not guilty. Likewise in Islamic Law. It is not a case of "If it is Sharia it must be justice" as many would suggest, but a case of "If it isn't justice it isn't Sharia"!

When the book became a global event, the willingness of muslims to accept someone else's opinions with regard to its content became even more incomprehensible to me. Far from feeling that it should not be read, it seemed to me that reading the book was an absolute necessity if I was to be able to discuss it with any credibility. Of better than average literacy and intelligence, fluent in the literary forms of my English mother tongue, and a committed and practising muslim, I considered myself better qualified to evaluate the content of the book than any of the so-called "muslim leaders" appearing nightly on my TV screen.

Apparently intoxicated with visions of the muslim community united behind their leadership, they seemed oblivious to the inevitable effects of their media rantings, the first effect being to make the book an immediate global sell-out. A sell-out to non-muslims only, however, as the muslim facility for opting out of any critical thought in matters relating to religion became readily apparent over future months. In the year since that time, I have met a grand total of three muslims who have

read the book, one of whom was a convert whose impressions were identical to mine, and the other two were Iranian with limited English who understandably had a different point of view. That so few muslims have bothered to even attempt to read this book, which has been the single most important issue dominating muslim/non-muslim relationships over the last year, seems incredible even to one inured to muslim intellectual apathy. Nonetheless, it must stand as a tragic reminder of the parlous state into which our community has sunk.

Reading the book

But many people had asked for my opinion, and not being one to shoot my mouth off without first looking into what I was talking about, I kept my answers to fairly general background statements until, after a reprint, I finally obtained a copy of the book. And here the story gets stranger yet, as I didn't find it blasphemous at all. In fact, I didn't even find it offensive. It was occasionally shocking it is true, but that might be considered a requirement for any book that is to be at all intellectually stimulating, and the shocks were certainly not from the out of context passages which were the centre of most muslims attention.

The man's literary style is extraordinary. Each page stuffed with references to other books, movies, and actual events, casting a net of allusions peculiar to the British culture of the time that shaped his life, and shared by many, though few of them muslims. I could understand the difficulty that non-fluent English speakers from another place or time would have in grasping even a fraction of the inferences, but he seemed to possess a rare gift for someone born muslim - he spoke the same cultural language as me. I had read all the books he referred to, I had seen all the movies and TV shows he had seen, I had lived through the same events, and knew the words to the same popular songs. We were clearly from the same time and place, we just seemed to be traversing our culture in opposite directions.

So the whole thing was clearly a misunderstanding on the part of muslims for whom the language and literary form were beyond their grasp. This explanation was good enough for my non-muslim friends, but to my further concern brought nothing but looks of blank disbelief from muslims. They found it unimaginable that they could have put so much faith in a system capable of being so overwhelmingly united in a mistake. It just did not compute. Too much emotional commitment had been invested in the acceptance of the book as blasphemy. Two dozen people have died in the furore, and to suggest that it was not Salman Rushdie's fault is to suggest the unthinkable - that it might be someone else's.

Manipulation of public opinion

What happened early on was that the muslims moved the goalposts. Rather than discuss the content of the book, and whether what they were saying about it was true, they insisted that loud assertion was equivalent to fact, and quickly moved the discussion on to matters of ethnic minority rights, censorship, and a post-fatwa debate as to whether "this blasphemy" deserved the death penalty. Politicians, desperately ignorant of Islam, naturally imagined that these "religious leaders" knew what they were talking about. Clearly afraid of appearing racist, they treated them with kid gloves, letting the most outrageous of statements go unchallenged, and by their lack of a clear response acquiescing in muslim misrepresentation and confusion.

TV news programmes gave national publicity to rabid "muslim leaders", never demanding that they make sense of what they were saying, or challenging alleged facts as they would with a politician. Profoundly ignorant of Islam, newscasters obviously expected muslims to talk arrant nonsense, and so let them get away with it as part of their right to religious freedom. It may have made good television for some, but those of us who consider our Islam to be both rational and tolerant could not but be horrified by this daily presentation of the worst examples of what is said and done in the name of God and the Prophet. I can only hope that it is not yet too late to influence muslim opinion by looking at what the book actually says. But before I do that, let me continue with the ensuing muslim response.

I have mentioned how those creating the greatest uproar, so certain of their interpretations that they could tear phrases out of context and insert words into the text, were also certain enough of their opinions to demand that muslims should not read the book. This ensured that most of the marchers were united in their ignorance. But whereas the distress of many sincere muslims was apparent, I know for a fact that some at least were fully aware of what they were doing, and quite happy to ignore the truth for conscious or unconscious self-aggrandisement. I know because I talked to them.

So what were these interpretations that upset muslims so much? You must have heard them on the news, or read them in the papers. The Prophet was a shyster, his wives were whores, his companions were scum, Abraham was a bastard, the idea of God was mocked, and the Quran was the work of the Devil. Well, that sounds like enough to start a riot or two. If you call any man's wife or mother a whore you will be lucky to get away without an altercation, let alone attributing such epithets to the Mothers of the Faithful. Was it really possible that even the most stupid of men born into the muslim world could write such crass statements and expect to get away with them? Did the muslims really think that a writer with the subtlety to win the Booker prize was now writing like an intellectual vegetable? Did it not occur to muslims that there might be more to it than that?

Bombast and character assassination

With the passing of the death sentence Salman Rushdie went to ground, and as the probability of any muslim actually meeting him diminished, so the sub-continental tendency to bombast was given full rein, and out of the woodwork came waves of volunteers all eager to tell the newspapers, or better still the TV cameras, how they personally would plunge the knife or pull the trigger. How many would have felt so free to voice their opposition to the law in any muslim country? In which muslim country would they have expected similar tolerance from the authorities in response to their public demands for murder? As they jostled for the next interview, how many of these muslims showed the slightest concern for the effect on race relations in society, the effect on muslim children's lives at school, or the perception of Islam in the non-muslim community at large?

Now that it was clearly open season on Salman Rushdie, the muslims really got into the spirit of the thing. It was now clearly unnecessary to have read the book to be a critic nor was there any risk in printing unsubstantiated allegations, so every muslim newspaper, magazine and pamphlet launched itself on a campaign of smears and vilification, gleefully hurling scurrilous abuse with the sanctimonious self-righteousness of the tabloid gutter press. Now I have never met Mr. Rushdie, but I find it hard to believe that his personal life is any less Islamic than most of those who share his ethnic roots uncensored by their community. Of course, I have seen him on the television where he impressed me as being both arrogant and obnoxious, but if those two traits were sufficient to merit a death sentence then the mosques would turn to abattoirs with few left standing in the lines at Friday prayer.

Most of the arguments against the book and its author were as thin as tissue paper. It was suggested that his motivation was financial gain, though never coming up with a prior example of anyone making vast sums of money from a complex intellectual novel. Even if he had written a novel that sold as well as a Jackie Collins he wouldn't have made that much money. He would have been better off opening a Cash & Carry if he had wanted a Rolls Royce. The only reason that the book has sold in such large numbers is because the muslims turned it into an international furore.

It was suggested that he wrote the book knowing that the uproar would bring him fame and glory, though as the uproar has largely come from the likelihood of his fame being rapidly posthumous, it seems a rather peculiar route to choose. Before he started on the book he had already achieved more success than the majority of writers, and for the muslims to infer that you can win major literary prizes merely by achieving notoriety shows a serious detachment from the real world. It was never suggested that he might have been motivated by an overwhelming need to express the truth as he sees it. But then, in most mosques "truth" is considered to be a dangerous word.

Literary criticisms

Along with the muslim readiness to assassinate Mr. Rushdie's character and motives, came a headlong rush to write "criticisms" of his novel. Following the methodological precedent set at the outset, any number of people set about ripping unrelated words and phrases from the book to prove whatever they wanted. Take any character from the book, no matter how villainous or despicable, pluck the words out of his mouth and lo, Mr. Rushdie is a villain too. Find a racist character, grab a few words, and poor Salman is a racist. Is there a jew-hater in the cast of thousands, then obviously the author is anti-semitic. Are all the characters in a book or movie to be totally pure and unblemished? There goes just about every piece of fiction ever written in the history of the world. How is it possible that muslims did not shout down this insanity?

Perhaps the worst example of this kind was written by Ahmad Deedat, our very own Rainman proving once more that a photographic memory can be allied to zero comprehension. Widely distributed throughout the mosques ("The Best of Rushdie?" -available free if you want a copy), it would be laughable if it wasn't taken seriously by so many in the muslim community. Its critical precepts can easily be demolished by any intelligent twelve year old, though it is hardly a tract that one would wish a minor to read, as not only does he blame Salman Rushdie for the gang rape of a white woman by black youths in New York's Central Park, but also recommends that the same treatment should be meted out to Susan Sontag and Marianne Wiggins. It is an outrage that such diatribes should be circulating freely in the mosques, and printed in the name of "Islamic Propagation". That no-one speaks out against it brings shame upon all muslims.

The poisonous words of Mr. Deedat were also typical of the way muslim attacks on the book were changing. For in his pamphlet he never once mentions the topics which were supposed to be the heart of the matter - the "sacrilege". Instead, he applies his novel method of literary criticism (in which you read with a highlighter in one hand to mark those words which offend you) to fill the majority of his 24 pages with a catalogue of swearwords extracted from the book. The objections to Rushdie's "blasphemy" had subtly shifted to attacks on his profanity, a much more popular approach amongst those who may know nothing about Islam but can certainly recognize a swearword. And they know how to recognize a swearword, of course, because it is the language of the street and people in the society around them, and just possibly the language of their friends and families - the real world language in which Salman Rushdie writes. Since the bowdlerized Shakespeare of my schooldays, I have grown through Ulysses and Lady Chatterly, Burns' Merry Muse, oriental sex-manuals and the unfettered prose of modern fiction, yet I have never discovered a writer who used more swearwords than the common man.

Objections to literary representations of "low-life" are nothing new (Dickens had the problem when he wrote *Oliver Twist* and quoted Fielding in his defense), but surely muslims of all people should have known better than to approach a book with such singleminded disregard for context. After all, it is an essential aspect of Quranic exegesis that no part can be commented upon without first considering it in the light of the entire Revelation. What do muslims think of a book which says: "Trade is like usury", "Fear not to give partners to Allah", "Help not each other", and "Woe to the worshippers"? Whatever they think, they are unlikely to demand that it is banned, because of course these are snippets from the Quran (as translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali - Quran 2.275/6.81/37.25/107.4), and although they are not misquoted they are ripped completely out of their context.

Freedom of the individual

Is it really possible that there are no muslims left in the world who are capable of seeing and expressing an alternative point of view? Do muslims really want freedom of speech? It is obviously not a very high priority in most muslim countries where criticism of the governing body often warrants imprisonment or even death, where the sermon at the Friday prayers can come under government control, and classical works of Islamic scholarship can be banned if at odds with present orthodoxy. Can it be that of the muslims enjoying the rights and freedoms that are accepted as an integral part of life in Britain, so few are aware of the intellectual foundations on which they are based?

In the event, it was left almost entirely to western non-muslims to fight for these basic principles, as muslim intellectual apathy, political opportunism, and individual cowardice left the moral high ground to others. Of course, there were a few such as Tariq Ali and Hanif Kureishi, showing an awareness of the Asian nominally muslim culture into which they like Rushdie had been born, but who often show little understanding of Islam, or concern or affection for the essential truths that lie at its heart, so that their language was unlikely to carry much weight in the mosque going community. In fact, when the only defence of the book that muslims were likely to hear was left to such as Fay Weldon, there seemed little need for a prosecution counsel.

It is something for muslims to think about, that perhaps the most tolerant muslim response was a suggestion that the book include a warning that its contents were not to be read as historical truth. When a book begins with the two main characters falling 30,000 ft. without parachutes and surviving unharmed, though changed by the fact that one now shines with a halo, while the other slowly through the course of the book turns into an eight foot tall hairy goat with horns and hoofs and breathing smoke, is it really necessary that muslims be informed that this book is a work of fiction? Is this really the degree of labelling that we require in the muslim world? Are muslims really incapable of reading the book and extracting an alternative meaning to the one which their religious leaders have so conveniently supplied?

AN ALTERNATIVE MUSLIM CRITIQUE OF THE BOOK

Fiction to understand fact

I should perhaps first make a comment about the novel. A fairly recent introduction to the English literary forms, in the twentieth century it has become our most popular means of fictional communication. But fiction has no appeal or relevance unless it is somehow anchored in the reality of our own experience. The exploration of a character's psychology gives us a language to understand those around us as well as ourselves. Descriptions of an alternative society, even set on an alien planet, can give insight into the society in which we ourselves live. Stories of unlikely or even impossible events set in a clearly recognizable background can help us to evaluate our own experience of events taking place in that scenario. These ideas may be so familiar to us that they are relegated to the unconscious, but to many muslims in the world they are strange territory, and they must be explained before it is possible to discuss the books meaning or content.

To try to define the novel is extremely difficult, as authors constantly strive to stretch the boundaries of the form, but the most popular forms usually shape themselves around the telling of a story, using all the tricks of language to create and maintain interest in characters, settings and plot. Many novels have little more than this, but great literature uses this relatively simple surface level as a structure around which can be woven much more subtle and complex themes giving insight into the human condition. A good author combines the creative imagination required to invent a good story, fleshing out believable characters and describing the detail of their surroundings, plus the talent for language needed to sustain the interest of a range of readers of widely differing social and intellectual groups, plus an understanding of the thought processes, motivations and desires of human beings sufficient to write a book that merits repeated reading, critical analysis and in-depth discussion. This combination is rare.

Recording, commentating and questioning

Considering the complexities of the novel form, it is clearly ridiculous in most cases to try to reduce an author's intent to a few bald statements. If that were possible, presumably the author would not have bothered to write the rest of the book. But

as this attitude is central to the Rushdie affair, we should consider the sources of an author's material and the way it is selected and presented if we are to judge how much it is to be seen as the opinions of the author. One obvious way in which a novelist can work is to operate as a recorder or reporter. For characters to be believable their language and conversations must ring true, and except in exceptional fantasy circumstances this means drawing on real conversations that surround us, recording the opinions and verbal traits of people in society in the same way that one might attribute fictional characters with the physical characteristics of real people. But just as one would not blame photographers for the actions of the people that they photograph, or blame reporters for the statements of the subjects that they interview, one can hardly blame a novelist for using language and opinions that one might hear on a bus.

A photographer may portray an exact reproduction of a scene, but at the same time knows that it is in fact a frozen moment in time as seen from a specific place. The selection of that precise time and place in which to press the button and form a link between the viewer and the event is the art form of the photographer, who in that way can express an opinion by quite literally sharing a point of view. Similarly, a reporter may claim objectivity but in the selection of quotations from a speech, or the choice of attributes of a person to describe, or just the words used for a description can subtly lead the reader in the direction of a particular opinion. Unlike a journalist however, a novelist rarely claims attempted objectivity or factual reportage. The "facts" of a novel are only the means by which the writer displays his literary skills and considers more general ideas through underlying themes.

Thus the view of the author as recorder is allied to that of the author as commentator, though even here one must be careful not to draw conclusions that are too simplistic. The use of the first person singular or plural, or the disembodied "voice of the author" are useful and traditional literary techniques which do not necessarily reflect the actual views of the author. For the role of the commentator can often be seen as one in which the author asks essential questions and challenges traditional or clichéd responses. This requirement for opinions to be tested by questioning is an essential part of intellectual traditions throughout the world, and was seen as an essential characteristic of muslim education until the intellectual decline of the last few hundred years following "the closing of the gates of ijihad". Perhaps the greatest reason for our recent decline was the association of faith with unquestioning acceptance, the rejection of doubt and questioning, and the exclusion from muslim intellectual life of the "Devil's Advocate". Which brings me neatly to the specific author and the specific novel we have to consider - Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*!

The Satanic Verses

In the light of what I have said so far, is it really possible to summarize what the book is all about? I think it must be made plain that if a man spends several years writing a five hundred and fifty page novel of tremendous subtlety and complexity, it cannot be encapsulated in a few hastily written sentences. Ultimately any reduction must also be a simplification, and the book must be judged in its totality. But at the same time, any serious attempt to consider the book in its entirety must inevitably be better than the ludicrously inadequate attempts at literary criticism that the muslims have made so far, so apart from the time and effort involved I won't feel too bad about making the attempt. Having complained about the way that the book has been so ruthlessly dismembered for use as ammunition to assassinate the author's character, it is perhaps paradoxical that I should have to use the same technique to make value judgements with regard to Mr. Rushdie's thoughts and intentions, but considering the circumstances it's probably the best key to his thoughts upon the matter that I am likely to get, an interview now being out of the question.

In *The Satanic Verses* we can see Salman Rushdie as recorder, commentator and Devil's Advocate. His talents as a recorder of present daily life are extraordinary, particularly in the arena of language, where he has the ability to capture not just the mellifluous tones of the highly educated few but the language of the street (in both English and Indian varieties as well as an assortment of gradations inbetween), while somehow managing to transform the crudity and primal vocabulary of the latter into something more akin to poetry. The novel is split like his main characters between modern London and Bombay, real and recognisable down to minute detail, but taking the bizarre quality of real life beyond the imagination of most of us, through the visionary world of dreams and pushing it one step further into the unnatural and fantastical world of the symbolic, with a magical storytelling drawing us into this invented world, suspending our disbelief, and rushing us along pell-mell on a flood of amazing words, words, words.

A search for truth

His talents as a commentator are of course much more debatable, as personal judgement in such matters tends to be closely related to the amount an author reinforces one's own opinion. Nonetheless, although I personally feel ultimately dissatisfied with what I consider to be his conceptual limitations concerning matters religious (even though this may be inevitable considering his formative background), with regard to almost any of the myriad topics considered in the book he has made more serious effort to apply his brain cells than the overwhelming majority of his detractors. Clearly this is why they find him so dangerous. But on the whole, he doesn't try to use the novel to achieve goals that are relatively inconsistent with fiction in the first place, rarely giving the impression of expecting neat conclusions or trying to define absolutes.

Yet the novel carries an overwhelming sense of a sincere search for the truth of the human condition, but a search using the tools he acquired through his secular English education, namely doubt, questioning and debate. In fact, he so rarely puts forward an argument without flipping the coin and countering it that it occasionally feels like intellectual self-indulgence, and one yearns for some good old human certainty of opinion, rather than this constant agnostic shilly-shallying. He certainly shares "*Chamcha's sense of balance, his much-to-be-said-for-and-against reflex*" (SV408), the classic Devil's advocate. But a Devil's advocate is not the Devil himself, as many muslims like to think of Salman Rushdie at the moment, which means that some muslims have a serious problem as they obviously haven't yet learned how to recognise the genuine article.

Style and humour

His style, mind you, is perhaps not the most accessible to those with limited English, although to talk of his style is to oversimplify, as he borrows all sorts of styles for different bits and pieces, stitching them together like a literary jig-saw. They can be as varied as the length of his sentences, swinging wildly from one word expletives to two hundred word mazes with the flamboyance of a Tristram Shandy. Admittedly, when reading Rushdie it is possible to forget the story by getting lost in bookish detective work, trying to recall just what original he is borrowing from on any specific page. Just as his ear for the diversity of tales and accents hanging in the air around him acts like a magic tape recorder, he constantly echoes other writings drawn from the world's literary cornucopia. Ancient and modern, his appetite for reading has obviously been voracious. Victorian Englishmen, Dickens and Dodgson, more recent Europeans, Grass and Hesse, and South American comparisons with Marquez and Borges are clearly to be seen. But an awareness of the variety of his stylistic sources is not necessary to enjoy the book. The fact that he quotes Ovid and Lucretius in the original latin means that it certainly isn't Jackie Collins, but it is not as hard to read as some would suggest.

It may seem hard to believe these words, coming from a committed muslim, but when first reading the book I found it enchanting not offensive. On a second reading before writing this critique, in the light of what has transpired in the world since its publication, I could occasionally feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise with the uncanny quality life can have of shaping itself to match imaginative fiction. For it has not chosen to match the extracts that seemed closest to the non-fictional world, but those extracts that originally read as dream and nightmare, much as modern science has aligned itself to past science-fiction rather than to the "believable" scientific projections of the same period. If it felt like that for me, what must it have seemed like for poor Salman - "*he had a strange sense of being haunted, a feeling that the shades of his imagination were stepping out into the real world, that destiny was acquiring the slow, fatal logic of a dream.*" (SV540)

Much of the offense taken at the book has clearly come from an inability to penetrate his language and his changing styles. It is hard to tell what aspects of language are hardest to translate, but clearly some are easier than others. Parts of the book are written with the suspense of a Thriller, and often I found myself unable to turn the pages fast enough, so impatient was I to see what would happen next, the eagerness sometimes blended with horror as one might helplessly watch a man disembowel himself. Yet surely such passages are easy to translate compared to those involving that sense of humour peculiar to the English, and especially irony. Norman Wisdom may fill Moscow cinemas, and Benny Hill is without question our most popular comedy export anywhere else in the world. But our more subtle verbal sense of humour rarely travels so well, and especially when it is written down. To appreciate the wit you have to be able to hear the tone of voice from off the page. It is the tone of voice which tells you that it is not serious.

The book is thick with humour, and certainly a great deal funnier than Salman Rushdie comes across in person on the TV screen. His wit can be cutting in the extreme, but tends to be directed mainly at hypocrisy. He shows a patently deep and sincere affection for his fellow man with all his warts and oddities, and his most mocking tones are reserved for those characters most reminiscent of himself. Of course, when reading that "*A book is a product of a pact with the Devil that inverts the Faustian contract ... the writer agrees to the ruination of his life, and gains (but only if he's lucky) maybe not eternity, but posterity, at least. Either way ... it's the Devil who wins*" (SV459), it is useful to know that it is not necessarily meant literally, and that the author identifies with "*Bentine, Milligan, and Sellers*" (SV403), his hero's lawyer, accountant and agent. And here it helps your understanding if you are familiar enough with English popular culture of the recent past to know to whom the author is referring.

Background scenery

But enough of style, let me deal more with content and try to encapsulate what the book is about, and first I should mention its settings. The main settings of the book are four, two of them fiction set in real world places, and two of them fiction set in dream world places (though still drawn from real world places, as dreams tend to be). The settings are Modern London, Modern Bombay, a Dream India, and a Dream place called Jahilia.

Modern London is Salman Rushdie's adopted home. He talks familiarly of its people and places as they existed during the time of the book's writing. When he talks of the Thatcherite political climate he speaks of particular events which to some future reader will be ancient history. His examples of London's multicultural complexities and character types may be relevant and recognisable at the moment, but in fifty years time will be seen in a different light and used in quite a different

way. He is aware that the immigrant experience will eventually change Britain as much as the immigrants have changed themselves, recognising that the process is a two-way relationship, more of an espousal than an adoption. Unlike those many muslims who constantly refer to Britain as their "host" community, he makes himself at home and not only demands his rights but happily shouts its praises, especially compared to that "nation of immigrants" on the other side of the Atlantic.

"Would the United States, with its are-you-now-have-you-ever-beens, have permitted Ho Chi Minh to cook in its hotel kitchens? What would its McCarren-Walter Act have to say about a latter-day Karl Marx, standing bushy-bearded at its gates, waiting to cross its yellow lines? O Proper London! Dull would he truly be of soul who did not prefer its faded splendours, its new hesitations, to the hot certainties of that transatlantic New Rome with its Nazified architectural gigantism" (SV399) Speaking personally, having been born here as part of that "host" community which gave me the right to choose to live as a muslim (just as it gives muslims the right to choose not to do so if they wish), I have no difficulty in agreeing that *"there is in the Englishman a combination of qualities, a modesty, an independence, a responsibility, a repose, which one would seek in vain among the Nations of the Earth" (SV424)*. I suspect that many of the children daily being born here as English muslims will be happy to agree with that statement in a very few years time.

These children will grow into their surroundings naturally. It is the older generation who still think of somewhere far away as "Home", and if they are incapable of finding a way of integrating they must not be surprised if their children take the problem into their own hands. Whatever they come up with can only be better than those who see no solution at all except isolationist ghettos. Unlike their elders, the young "Asians" know that they cannot escape their ethnic roots - it is written on their skin - but what is inside is different. Salman Rushdie came here from India when he was very young, but he does not voice the changes he experienced in simpleminded platitudes, or reduce any discussion of the problems involved to a polite inoffensive charade. When he looks at his roots in India he sees the wonder and the horror of it in all its paradoxical complexity, and the confrontation is painful.

"Caught in the aspic of his adopted language, he had begun to hear, in India's Babel, an ominous warning: don't come back again. When you have stepped through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds. 'Give up on me' he begged her. 'I don't like people dropping in to see me without warning. I have forgotten the rules of seven-tiles and kabaddi. I can't recite my prayers. I don't know what should happen at a nikah ceremony, and in this city where I grew up I get lost if I'm on my own. This isn't home. It makes me giddy because it feels like home and is not. It makes my heart tremble and my head spin." (SV58) The city he writes of is modern Bombay, where the glitteringly wealthy live alongside beggars starving on the streets, and where the biggest movie industry in the world shapes the spiritual, aesthetic and material dreams and aspirations of the impoverished masses. To face the internal contradictions involved in the act of looking honestly at his roots is clearly painful. It would seem that when doing so he holds a mirror up to the Asian community into which they do not wish to look.

Dream scenery

The vast majority of the novel is set in these surroundings, but there are also two places that are the settings for the hero's dreams and schizophrenic nightmares, and as might be expected in the circumstances they have a somewhat looser connection with reality. 55 pages of dreams are set once more in a recognisable India though seen from a different perspective, no longer from the sumptuous city viewpoint of the movie stars of Bombay, but through the eyes of those who live in a village known in the book as Titlipur, and describing their view of the world that surrounds them as they travel on foot to the city and the sea. But the final major setting is the one that has been the cause of all the trouble. 70 pages are set in a place that is known in the book as Jahilia, and which has a striking resemblance in its attributes and inhabitants to the Makkah of the Prophet and his Companions.

To clarify the intentions of the author in this section (especially with regard to his distinguishing historical truth from symbolic dream) is the meat of this whole essay, and will be integral to many of the more detailed considerations that will come later. But for now, I would like to give the overwhelming impression that I (an English born committed muslim by choice) received from the Jahilia passages of the Book, impressions which were only made more certain on a second reading of the so-called offensive sections. I do not believe for one moment that Salman Rushdie intended these sections to be read as historical truth. I do not believe that he expected that anyone fluent in the English language would do so either, whether they were muslim or not. Clearly his Jahilia stories do not attempt to follow the Seerah (the Prophet's biography) chronologically, though occasionally they are based on real characters and events, and equally clearly Salman Rushdie has more knowledge of the historical characters and events than most muslims. It is therefore presumed that if he could have got things right if he had wanted he must have changed things deliberately to deceive.

Yet the Jahilia sections are no more of a chaotic jumble than you would hear from any average "muslim" on the street (let alone one mad and dreaming) if you asked him to outline the Seerah for you, but their tone would be much more reverent, and there in the language is the key. He talks of Jahilia in terms that he might apply to London or any other modern city, and the language of its inhabitants could be heard on any London street. When talking of Jahilia he is talking of the present day world of muslims, and as many committed muslims of today will freely admit the muslim world has now indeed become

Jahilia, the world of ignorance. Strangely enough, I found that these sections far from being offensive were exciting and enjoyable, and would positively enhance many muslims understanding of the historical setting of the Seerah. For although Jahilia is a fictional town it has more life and vigour and a feel for "how it must have been" in a town such as Makkah fourteen centuries ago than any text that I have read describing the time of the Prophet. You can smell what it was like before the memory was sanitized by generations of well-meaning muslims smothering the humanity of the Prophet and his companions under immoderate devotional reverence.

The storyline

So those are the settings in which the story is set, and it is time to consider that story - but then, that is most certainly easier said than done. After all, if he could have put it in a paragraph he wouldn't have taken five years and five hundred and fifty pages! What takes the time, of course, is not writing the surface story, but the subtlety and complexity of the underlying themes, and these I will deal with shortly. The main story is very simple. It traces the intertwined stories of two men of very different characters, both born in India but choosing to live in England - for most of the story at any rate. It is in these two characters that Salman Rushdie would seem to be employing his most autobiographical references, their lives often seeming to be based quite directly on his own life experiences. But one has to read very little of the book to see just how much any original facts have been transformed. On the first page they arrive in England, falling without parachutes from an exploding plane and miraculously survive. From that moment their lives are strangely merged and changed, as one of them turns into a giant goat, the icon of the devil, and the other begins to shine with a halo, the icon of saintliness, though apparently they retain the same personalities within. The first goes by the name of Saladin Chamcha (Salahuddin Chamchawala), and the second is Gibreel Farishta.

Often it seems that they are like two sides of a coin. Gibreel is a star of the Bombay movies, his face on every magazine and flyposted wall, and recognised from his theologicals as the movie image of God. Saladin is the Man of a Thousand Voices, ruling the airwaves in the more prosaic guise of speaking ketchup bottles, crisps or carpets, his voice ubiquitous but never recognised, and his face never seen. As they try to deal with their rebirth in this country they are treated in opposite ways, Gibreel finds love and adulation, returning to his movie-fans amidst spotlights and fanfares, while Saladin is jilted and rejected, thrown out of his accommodation and fired from his job. *"So there is also this: that Chamcha longs to stand in Farishta's shoes, while his own footwear is of no interest whatsoever to Gibreel. ... Or are there deeper resentments here, gripes for which this so-called Primary Cause is, in truth, no more than a substitute, a front? ... a hapless fellow continuously punished for uncommitted crimes, the other, called angelic by one and all, the type of man who gets away with everything"* (SV426)

Throughout the book their actions and experiences mirror each other. Saladin instigates a total breakdown in Gibreel's life and personality by whispering pernicious verses to him over the telephone. Gibreel in his schizophrenic state dreams himself to be his archangelic namesake whispering Satanic Verses instead of Revelation. Things are never quite what they seem, however, with Gibreel in his angelic character also wandering around the streets of modern London. But it would hardly be fair to the potential reader for me to tell all the twists and turns of the plot, let alone detail the denouement of the novel, so at this point I will only mention one aspect of the end of the book which I found intriguing. If one is to see shades of Salman Rushdie in the english-educated anglophile Chamcha and the media-feted Gibreel, it is typical of the book's surprises that in the end they both return to the India of their birth. I wonder if that is not in fact the author's dream, and I wonder what are the chances of it ever happening now.

Stories within the story

So that is the main story, and indeed there isn't much to it even though there is much more than I have mentioned, but there are stories within the story just like the Arabian Nights. Several sub-plots exist involving the minor characters that populate Gibreel and Chamcha's world, and the names of these minor characters often carry through to stories existing within stories as the author weaves a complex web of themes and parallels. To rip extracts out of this context with no consideration for its interwoven quality is to disregard the essential nature of the book. The names of the characters in Gibreel's London are also the names of the characters in his dreams, and their dream counterparts often assume a higher profile in the novel than the original minor characters. To illustrate this, however, we will need to know the stories within the story, and three stories which it will be essential to consider take place in Gibreel's schizophrenic dreams.

In Jahilia, a city of sand in the desert, is set the story of a man named Mahound, who receives what he considers to be divine revelations that are spoken to him by the archangel Gibreel Farishta. He and his followers are persecuted by the idol-worshipping rulers of Jahilia, forced to leave town to establish their religion somewhere more hospitable, and eventually return in triumph to overturn the idols. A simple tale which so clearly parallels the Seerah of the Prophet that we all know by now what has ensued, and therefore so important that I will deal with it in more detail later. But this story is only the setting for a story within the story within the dream within the story. The Jahilian response is imagined, from the fury of their despotic queen/empress Hind (wife of the Jahilian Grandee Abu Simbel) to the irreverent lampooning of the local whores and their clientele.

These tales are mostly shaped around the intertwined stories of two characters. One is Baal, a poet who spends much of his story ensconced in the Jahilian whorehouse, and who is named after a phallic fertility god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites renowned for being worshipped in a particularly orgiastic manner. Baal's story is linked with that of Salman, one of Mahound's companions but different from the others in two ways. For one thing he is an immigrant (from Persia), and for another he is racked by doubt. By the strangest of coincidences he also shares his name with the author of the book, but then the names of most of the characters cut across all of the stories, real or imagined. Hind is also the wife in London of Mohamed Sufyan, that *"least doctrinaire of hajis"* (SV243), and when a Jahilian whore for the titillation of her clients adopts the name of Ayesha the wife of Mahound (as well as the wife of the Prophet Muhammad), she also shares her name with Ayesha the *"butterfly-shrouded prophetess"* (SV485), a central character in another of Gibreel's serial dreams which tells the story of the Ayesha Hajj.

In Titlipur we see the mystical side of Indian village life. When a local woman develops cancer for which the doctors offer no hope of remission, the village sets off in a group act of faith in the footsteps of the butterfly-eater Ayesha, who claims to have received messages from the archangel Gibreel. She says that for the cancer to be assuaged they must walk to Makkah overland and through the parted Arabian sea. The dream tells the story of the doubts and faith of those who make the journey as well as various incidents along the way, some of great humour and some of vivid horror, such as the stoning of an abandoned infant at the behest of a local imam (SV497). The imam is just one small link with yet another of Gibreel's dreams, only 10 pages long in the novel and rarely mentioned in any commentaries but of enormous political implications. For Ayesha is also the name of the Empress of Dosh - the enemy of the exiled Imam (SV206)

The Imam's story tells of a muslim religious leader forced to live in what he sees as the Godless west (in this case London), his plans to return in triumph to his homeland, his ultimate success and its consequences. It is strange that this section of the book is so rarely mentioned when there are such obvious similarities to the story of the Imam Khomeini, and one might have expected it at least to have been considered as having influenced his opinion. But the opinions expressed about the dream Imam must be seen as part of the stories within the stories of the book. In London Salman, Bilal and Khalid are the names of the Imam's retinue, yet they are also the names of the companions of Mahound, as well as the names of some famous companions of the Prophet.

Themes and motifs

Even if one accepts that all Shakespeare's comedies can be summarized as "Boy-gets-girl-boy-loses-girl-boy-gets-girl", those stories still seem to be barely enough to fill over five hundred pages. What is important is the way they are used to discuss a variety of themes, and as many muslims seem to be under the impression that the book is no more than a lot of swearwords and abuse of the Prophet and his family, I will consider a variety of these major themes, and the minor themes which counterpoint them. It must be made clear that although these are themes that I consider to be self-evident or important, they are just my opinions of various extracts, and all of them can be reinterpreted. They will have a different relevance for other people in other places and times, and as I have already pointed out, to read some extracts in the light of what has happened since its publication is a graphic illustration of the way a book's relevance can change from day to day. The book is no different from when it was published, but to read it now can occasionally seem eerie, *"it was life, after all, that had rewarded his ... love of a civilization, by having him bedeviled, humiliated, broken upon its wheel. Not quite broken, he reminded himself"* (SV401). How much of the extracts might on occasion apply to the author, you must work out for yourself.

Cultural schizophrenia

One major theme throughout the book is the cultural schizophrenia of the immigrant, torn up from the land of his birth and deposited in an alien land where he is forced to find a method of participating and surviving, *"but never mind, he would be English, even if his classmates giggled at his voice and excluded him from their secrets, because these exclusions only increased his determination, and that was when he began to act, to find masks that these fellows would recognize, paleface masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was okay, he was people-like-us"* (SV43). Of course, to wear the masks is to share the fate of Chamcha who (like Rushdie) because of his success and his private-school education *"was known as 'Brown Uncle Tom'"* (SV267). But acclimatization changes any traveller, and he soon learns that despite romantic reminiscing and notions of return the process is no longer so easy. *"Chamcha reflected, ... He had to accept the fact that his blood no longer contained the immunising agents that would have enabled him to suffer India's reality"* (SV57). *"Damn you, India, Saladin Chamcha cursed silently, sinking back into his seat. To hell with you, I escaped your clutches long ago, you won't get your hooks into me again, you cannot drag me back"* (SV35).

He frequently talks of Chimeras, *"On Gardeners' World he was shown how to achieve something called a 'chimeran graft'.... and although his inattention caused him to miss the names of the two trees that had been bred into one - Mulberry? Laburnum? Broom? - the tree itself made him sit up and take notice. There it palpably was, a chimera with roots, firmly planted in and growing vigorously out of a piece of English earth: a tree, he thought, capable of taking the metaphoric*

place of the one his father had chopped down in a distant garden in another, incompatible world. If such a tree were possible, then so was he; he, too, could cohere, send down roots, survive" (SV406).

Elders and youth

This cultural separation from his father is one that is an essential theme of the book, a split which can be seen reflected clearly in the strained relationships between the elders and youth of the immigrant community anywhere in this country. *"Tell your son," Changez boomed at Nasreen, "that if he went abroad to learn contempt for his own kind, then his own kind can feel nothing but scorn for him. What is he? A faunteroy, a grand panjandrum? Is this my fate: to lose a son and find a freak?" "Whatever I am, father dear," Saladin told the older man, "I owe it all to you"* (SV45). *"His parents had been Muslims in the lackadaisical light manner of Bombayites; Changez Chamchawala had seemed far more godlike to his infant son than any Allah. That this father, this profane deity (albeit now discredited), had dropped to his knees in his old age and started bowing towards Mecca was hard for his godless son to accept"* (SV48).

The love-hate relationship with his family ties is something that Rushdie deals with frequently. His choice of words has often seemed appallingly offensive to many, but *"The flaws in the grand passion of Alleluia Cone and Gibreel Farishta were as follows: her secret fear of her secret desire, that is love; - owing to which she was wont to retreat from, even hit violently out at, the very person whose devotion she sought most"* (SV315), and despite the hatred that has been heaped upon him, it is love for his own, and a desire for that love to be returned, that is the most constant impression. *"Chamcha closed his eyes and fixed his thoughts on his father. The saddest thing, he realized, was that he could not remember a single happy day with Changez in his entire life as a man. And the most gladdening thing was the discovery that even the unforgivable crime of being one's father could be forgiven, after all, in the end. Hang on, he pleaded silently. I'm coming as fast as I can"* (SV513). As Baal says to Salman in Jahilia *"I hope you find home, and that there is something there to love"* (SV387).

Language and understanding

Another obvious problem for the immigrant is the need to speak two languages if he is to understand both mother and surrounding culture. More than most, Rushdie has a profound awareness of the shaping power of language *"Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true"* (SV281). He also has a happy familiarity with the English tongue of his adopted country *"Ours is a Copious Language, A Language Trying to Strangers; Ours is the Favoured Nation, Blest, and Safe from Dangers"* (SV423), and is clearly aware of how language problems can cause tragic separations between loved ones. *"And about this Parsi woman I know, Bapsy, that's her name, she lived in Germany for a while and fell in love with a Turk. - Trouble was, the only language they had in common was German; now Bapsy has forgotten almost all she knew, while his gets better and better; he writes her increasingly poetic letters and she can hardly reply in nursery rhyme. - Love dying, because of an inequality of language, what do you think of that?"* (SV183). Is it even possible for a love letter perhaps to be interpreted as unforgivable abuse?

Transformation and metamorphosis

The cultural schizophrenia of the immigrant minorities is also reflected in the frequent imagery of transformation, mutation and metamorphosis. *"An iceberg is water striving to be land; a mountain, especially a Himalaya, especially Everest, is land's attempt to metamorphose into sky; it is grounded flight, the earth mutated - nearly - into air, and become, in the true sense, exalted"* (SV303). The two main characters as they are transformed into opposites in some ways meld into each other, as when Gibreel loses his foul breath to Chamcha. Saladin, as though Through the Looking Glass, is completely transformed into goat (SV275), only returning to human form once more after being *"humanized ... by the fearsome concentration of his hate"* (SV294) for Gibreel.

But even here the author sees a key to the metamorphosis in the magical power of language, as when the semi-goat Chamcha is arrested by immigration officers and eventually beaten unconscious. He wakes up locked in a prison hospital amidst a strange crowd of illegal aliens *"The manticore ground its three rows of teeth in evident frustration. 'There's a woman over that way,' it said, 'who is now mostly water-buffalo. There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes. I myself am in the rag trade; for some years now I have been a highly paid male model based in Bombay, wearing a wide range of suitings and shirtings also. But who will employ me now? ... We're going to bust out of here before they turn us into anything worse. Every night I feel a different piece of me beginning to change' ... 'But how do they do it?' Chamcha wanted to know. 'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct'"* (SV168).

Great ideas in history

Unlike many of those who share his background, however, Salman Rushdie is not one to fall into the self-obsessed trap of restricting himself to 'Asian' or even 'Race' issues. Inevitably his viewpoint is from his own cultural background, but he

looks outwards towards a wider vision. Throughout the book he returns time and again to a discussion of what he calls "Great Ideas" in mankind's history, the way that they burst upon the world and establish themselves, and express themselves through human behaviour in the daily reality of human history. As with the themes related to cultural schizophrenia, he approaches the 'great ideas' on many different levels, and the related themes are interwoven and can be seen threading through more than one of his story lines, and of these great ideas he asks two questions. The second question comes towards the end of the book and I will deal with it later in this essay, but the first question appears early on and reappears on several different occasions.

We first hear it in a jumbo-jet from the mouth of terrorist, wired like a human grenade "*When a great idea comes into the world, a great cause, certain crucial questions are asked of it,*" she murmured. *'History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?'* *Saladin Chamcha want to argue with the woman, unbendingness can also be monomania, he wanted to say, it can be tyranny, and also it can be brittle, whereas what is flexible can also be humane, and strong enough to last. But he didn't say anything, of course*" (SV81). It is the "Great Idea", not Mahound, which is challenged as to whether it is "man or mouse". We hear the question more than once in Jahilia, "*Baal ... trying to say something; Any new idea, Mahound, is asked two questions. The first is asked when it is weak: WHAT KIND OF AN IDEA ARE YOU? Are you the kind that compromises, does deals, accommodates itself to society, aims to find a niche, to survive; or are you the cussed, bloody-minded, ramrod-backed type of damnfool notion that would rather break than sway with the breeze? - The kind that will almost certainly, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, be smashed to bits; but the hundredth time, will change the world*" (SV335).

Thus Rushdie uses his theme of the great idea to consider global issues and concepts. His attempt is clearly to achieve a philosophical plateau from which he can take an objective view of such issues, but stepping outside your own preconceptions is really not quite that easy. So although he talks of writing from a secular viewpoint without going so far as to commit himself to it, the intellectual framework of the book would suggest that the author rarely sees beyond the confines of the overwhelmingly prevailing socially acceptable philosophical attitude of the intellectual world in which he lives - agnosticism. But even then, Chamchaesque, his constant questioning leaves him ironically aware of this attitude's frailty when ultimately turned upon itself.

Secularism

"... in the opinion of the young woman, Swatilekha, Bhupen had been seduced by religion into a dangerous ambiguity. *'These days,' she insisted, 'our positions must be stated with crystal clarity. All metaphors are capable of misinterpretation.'* She offered her theory. *Society was orchestrated by what she called grand narratives: history, economics, ethics. In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had 'excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project'. As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of the grand narratives, that is religious faith. 'But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way.'* Bhupen said: *'We can't deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to pre-judge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of elitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?'* Swatilekha was scornful. *'Battle lines are being drawn up in India today,' she cried. 'Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on.'* Bhupen got up angrily, to go. Zeeny pacified him: *'We can't afford schisms. There's planning to be done.'* He sat down again, and Swatilekha kissed him on the cheek. *'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Too much college education, George always says'"* (SV537).

The book indeed seems to prefer the secular view as one more suited to the well-being of humanity, and the appalling excesses of religious zealots are easy targets to shoot down on the secularists' behalf, "*He was staring at the fuzzy photograph, on an inside page, of indistinct, bloated shapes floating down-river in large numbers. In a north Indian town there had been a massacre of Muslims, and their corpses had been dumped in the water, where they awaited the ministrations of some twentieth-century Gaffer Hexam. There were hundreds of bodies, swollen and rancid; the stench seemed to rise off the page. And in Kashmir a once-popular Chief Minister who had 'made an accommodation' with the Congress-I had shoes hurled at him during the Eid prayers by irate groups of Islamic fundamentalists. Communalism, sectarian tension, was omnipresent: as if the gods were going to war. In the eternal struggle between the world's beauty and its cruelty, cruelty was gaining ground by the day. Sisodia's voice intruded on these morose thoughts. The producer had woken up to see the photograph from Meerut staring up from Chamcha's fold-out table. 'Fact is,' he said without any of his usual bonhomie, 'religious ffaith, which encodes the highest ass ass aspirations of human race, is now, in our cocountry, the servant of lowest instincts, and gogo God is the creature of evil'"* (SV518).

Unfortunately, it seems that the author has little inclination, in this book at any rate, to search out equivalent horrors appertaining to decidedly secular systems. In this century alone we have not only atheistic Stalinist repression and the Cambodian killing fields to be counterdisplayed, but two very secular world wars, as well as a variety of more local if similarly unsavoury bloody encounters. Yet there still seems to be at Salman Rushdie's heart more than an atheistic vacuum. He does not seem to be denying the existence of the spirit, quite the reverse, as the book is filled with moral concern and the

nature of good and evil, surely the key to approaching that world which speaks in terms of God and the Devil, and it is not just unbelievers that would question those who claim to speak with Divine authority. *"Something was badly amiss with the spiritual life of the planet, thought Gibreel Farishta. Too many demons inside people claiming to believe in God"* (SV193).

Politics

The theme of the great idea is not just discussed in terms of philosophical esotericism, but also in the more prosaic world of global politics. So often caricatured as a sycophantic Anglophile, Rushdie is often a severe critic of the West and its third world exploitation, glancing briefly at issues such as drug dumping and the like. The modern day scenes of London are set in the land of Mrs. Torture, who like Imelda Marcos can be seen as having certain parallels to Hind, the Empress of Jahilia, a city which often seems indistinguishable to any major city in the world today.

"Hind Who could resist her? For her eternal youth which was also theirs; for her ferocity which gave them the illusion of being invincible; and for her bulls, which were refusals of time, of history, of age, which sang the city's undimmed magnificence and defied the garbage and decrepitude of the streets, which insisted on greatness, on leadership, on immortality, on the status of Jahilians as the custodians of the divine . . . for these writings the people forgave her her promiscuity, they turned a blind eye to the stories of Hind being weighed in emeralds on her birthday, they ignored rumours of orgies, they laughed when told of the size of her wardrobe, of the five hundred and eighty-one nightgowns made of gold leaf and the four hundred and twenty pairs of ruby slippers. The citizens of Jahilia dragged themselves through their increasingly dangerous streets, in which murder for small change was becoming commonplace, in which old women were being raped and ritually slaughtered, in which the riots of the starving were brutally put down by Hind's personal police force, the Manticorps; and in spite of the evidence of their eyes, stomachs and wallets, they believed what Hind whispered in their ears: Rule, Jahilia, glory of the world" (SV361).

Global and mythical politics are also made more tangible and specific and linked with cultural immigration themes, *"make no mistake we are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed; African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children. We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top. We shall be the hewers of the dead wood and the gardeners of the new. It is our turn now"* (SV414).

Thus global themes are brought down to a much more local level, and political issues are dealt with in terms more specific to our own society, confronting themes like police brutality, and the behaviour of massed humanity under the sway of demagogues, *"Chamcha went along, 'out of curiosity,' he said. 'I want to see how allegedly intelligent people turn themselves into a mob'"* (SV177). How ironic to read Salman Rushdie describe race riots for which in real life he would be made the excuse. How sad to watch sincere muslims being manipulated into a situation where violence seems the only way to assuage the pain instilled within them by affronted religious leaders consumed by rage.

The Muse and freedom

The great idea theme approached on a personal level considers the individual muse, and how far personal expression can be given absolute freedom, whether an individual should be prepared to compromise when confronting publicly acceptable taste and communal norms, or presume that societal values shape themselves around the ideas of the few. It is then, when the author starts to talk about the poet and his inspiration, that you can guess you are getting somewhere near the centre of the onion, and we must be sure to tread carefully in those areas where we are most likely to find irony confused with vanity. *"Feelings of outrage replaced those of exaltation, and Baal was surrounded by angry men demanding to know the reasons for this oblique, this most byzantine of insults. At this point Baal took off his absurd turban. 'I am Baal,' he announced. 'I recognise no jurisdiction except that of my Muse; or, to be exact, my dozen Muses.' Guards seized him. Baal stood face to face with the Prophet, mirror facing image, dark facing light"* (SV391).

This passage perhaps gives an insight into Rushdie's essential confusion, as whether he thinks that the final phrase has a clear meaning or not, he wrote the words and he must expect us to examine them. Now as they deal with the confrontation between the Poet and the Prophet they must surely be seen as critical, so let us look at them fairly closely. "Mirror facing image" is an interesting choice of phrase - a mirror of what? - an image of what? Neither a mirror nor an image is the original subject, so if a mirror reflects an image is there anybody there? Neither is it made clear who is meant to be the mirror and who is meant to be the image, nor if one should be thought of as good and one as evil. If we take them in sequence, Baal should be the mirror and the Prophet the image, but this to many would seem the wrong way around.

We live in a world where imagery is virtually all-powerful, where the advertisers message can travel subliminally to the brain directly through the eye, and where soap opera plots can assume more importance than real events in the world they imitate. Since the Prophetic overthrow of the images that men worshipped, muslims have always been very wary of the power of imagery and until comparatively recently have always handled it with great care. Now, even in a 'muslim' world

festooned with pictures of mighty leaders, one rarely sees an image of the Prophet. Yet many ancient traditions speak of the muslim soul as a mirror created to reflect the Light of God, who is the Light of Heavens and Earth. It is the task of the muslim to polish its' surface to reflect as much Divine light as possible out into the world. If that is indeed the task of the Poet then he should have no reason to fear either the Prophet or Allah.

The confusion of mirror and image is compounded even more, however, with the suggestion of confrontation between light and dark. Is it possible that Rushdie, with his extensive background reading does not realize that light and dark are not a duality? Rather than seeing the Poet as actively opposed to the Prophet's religion, it would seem more likely that the author is expressing the arrogance of the Poet who considers his Muse to be the Divinity and his message to be equal to Revelation, and with all his arrogance I do not believe that Rushdie is quite as arrogant as that. For if that were so I do not think he would have been so clumsy in his choice of phrase. What makes me choose to read the passage as irony rather than vanity is that I am sure that Salman Rushdie knows that dark is not the opposite of light. It is, of course, the absence of light.

Dream and madness

In considering Inspiration and Truth one wanders into definitions of what is ultimately real, and this theme is explored at great length throughout the book when it deals with dream and madness. *"The world, somebody wrote, is the place we prove real by dying in it"* (SV533). In fact, there is so much wandering in and out of dream that it sometimes feels like *The Discreet Charms of the Bourgeoisie*. A quarter of the book is set quite specifically in the dreams of Gibreel Farishta, and the rest is quite strange enough to be someone's nightmare. Jumpy Joshi and Chamcha share identical dreams of fatherhood, and in Gibreel's dream of Jahilia Salman also dreams that he is Gibreel. Like the Yellow Emperor who dreamed he was a butterfly that rested on a flower and fell asleep and dreamed he was the Emperor, Gibreel Farishta can have difficulty in deciding just which of his personae is the real Gibreel.

"Sometimes when he sleeps Gibreel becomes aware, without the dream, of himself sleeping, of himself dreaming his own awareness of his dream, and then a panic begins, O God, he cries out, O allgood allahgod, I've had my bloody chips, me. Got bugs in the brain, full mad, a looney tune and a gone baboon. Just as he, the businessman, felt when he first saw the archangel: thought he was cracked, wanted to throw himself down from a rock, from a high rock" (SV92). Thus the dream worlds are associated with madness, and not just in Gibreel's mind but in the minds of those with whom he shares his secrets. *"This time the asylum" says Alicja at one point, but Allie replies "We'll see, mother. He's asleep right now"* (SV356), and immediately following this interchange comes the dream chapter that is called "Return to Jahilia".

The strangeness of Gibreel's serial dreams eventually completely spill over into his waking life when *"the boundaries of the earth broke"* (SV318), and his *"insane idea"* that he was an angel (SV315) turns rapidly from jocular references to his madness, such as Alicja telling Allie that he requires *"a padded cell"* (SV338), to being defined ever more specifically as a clinical condition over the second half of the book. *"He faced the fact of his mental illness with courage, refusing to play it down or call it by a false name, but his recognition of it had, understandably, cowed him. And he was, for the moment, the easiest and most malleable of patients, somewhat dopey as a result of the heavy-duty medication he was being given by the specialists at the Maudsley Hospital, he filled in for her the full background to his illness: the strange serial dreams, and before that the near-fatal breakdown in India"* (SV339).

He is eventually treated as a schizophrenic (SV351), with predictable results *"Gibreel standing before him, remote of eye and perfunctory in his greeting, was under the most attentive medical supervision; obliged to take, on a daily basis, certain drugs that dulled his senses, because of the very real possibility of a recurrence of his no-longer-nameless illness, that is to say, paranoid schizophrenia"* (SV428), no longer a crazy dreamer but *"a man suffering from paranoid delusions of being the chief archangel of God"* (SV433). Yet even in his madness he defines his state by looking to the cultural traditions that surround him, finding language in literature to describe his nightmare, and referring to a story better known from horror movies. *"The craziness is in here and it drives me wild to think it could get out any minute, right now, and HE would be in charge again.' He had begun to characterize his 'possessed', 'angel' self as another person: in the Beckettian formula, NOT I. HE. His very own Mr.Hyde."* (SV340)

Bombay movies

So yet another theme used to compare the true and the false is that of the movies, especially the Indian variety that are Gibreel's profession. Parts of the novel are set in the Bombay movie studios, and another part in studios near London being used to film a Dickens musical. What better place to examine the nature of temples of idolatry than the pleasure palaces devoted to those false modern gods called movie idols. What better vehicle could one use to discuss the manipulation of mass opinion, or how much one must reduce religious truth for it to fit the format of the popular "theologicals". How much can one trust the moviemaker to put concern for truth above his desire for profit. Was "International Terrorists" really a spiritual exercise, or just an attempt to make some money by cashing in on the furore? Gibreel's Bombay movies are given little more artistic credibility than the Aliens Show, but at least his return to the theologicals is seen as an alternative to the asylum (SV346).

"Chamcha had heard that Gibreel Farishta had hit the comeback trail. His first film, The Parting of the Arabian Sea, had bombed badly; the special effects looked home-made, the girl in the central Ayesha role, a certain Pimple Billimoria, had been woefully inadequate, and Gibreel's own portrayal of the archangel had struck many critics as narcissistic and megalomaniac. The days when he could do no wrong were gone; his second feature, Mahound, had hit every imaginable religious reef, and sunk without trace" (SV513). Perhaps a hint at what Salman Rushdie might once in a lighter moment have suggested as the future fate of the Satanic Verses. In the event, the muslim reaction guaranteed that the book, not being allowed to sink without trace, would have to change the world.

Moral prerogatives

Just as the movies can be seen as cultural imperialism spreading around the world, they can also be considered as subtly evangelising the value systems upon which they are based, providing role models for individuals and giving shape to aspirations. This interplay of global and individual moral perceptions relates the "great idea" to realms of the subconscious and mythical. The ethics of the cinema are unlikely to get much mention in the average movie magazine, but once more Salman Rushdie uses a topic to explore wider themes, and as with all his themes concerning the "great idea" he is deeply concerned with examining questions of morality.

In fact, although woven throughout many other themes, the discussion of ethics and moral values can be considered as a theme in its own right. But unlike those muslims who would prefer to brush reality under the carpet, Salman Rushdie is quite prepared to deal with issues particularly relevant and not always complimentary to his own ethnic community, *"For boys like Battuta, white women - never mind fat, Jewish, non-deferential white women - were for fucking and throwing over. What one hates in whites - love of brown sugar - one must also hate when it turns up, inverted, in black. Bigotry is not only a function of power" (SV261).* (I should briefly point out here that Ahmad Deedat as an example of Rushdie's racism repeatedly quotes *"white women - never mind fat, Jewish, non-deferential white women - were for fucking and throwing over"*, even reducing it to *"white women - were for fucking and throwing over"* to illustrate the author's moral depravity, a fine example of decontextualisation if there ever was one. I would dearly like Mr.Deedat to explain if this was due to incomprehension or to wilful misrepresentation.)

When the majority of english-speaking muslims show so little concern for discussing moral issues in any depth or with any subtlety, it is tragic that in the face of one man's doubt they are incapable of even attempting to deal with it on its own terms. How sad that muslims should prove so inadequate to the task that their sole response would seem to be to reduce the matter to simplistic interpretations and crude personal abuse. Salman Rushdie may not be the world's greatest moral philosopher, but at least he is aware of the complexity of the issues and their centrality to the human experience *"What follows is tragedy. - Or, at the least the echo of tragedy, the full-blooded original being unavailable to modern men and women, so it's said. - A burlesque for our degraded, imitative times, in which clowns re-enact what was first done by heroes and by kings. - Well, then, so be it. - The question that's asked here remains as large as ever it was: which is, the nature of evil, how it's born, why it grows, how it takes unilateral possession of a many-sided human soul. Or, let's say: the enigma of Iago" (SV424).*

Religion

The discussion of morals and values brings us inevitably to the theme of Religion, which is so central to the book that it could even be considered as dominant to the "Great Idea", and certainly has a variety of sub-themes directly relating to it. Rushdie does attempt to consider religion in an essential, non-specific way, but mostly he speaks in terms which relate directly to the religious tradition that he knows best, his family religion, Islam, and I now come to a point that cannot be stressed too much. To anyone who understands Rushdie's language and also knows anything at all about the birth of Islam and the history of the Revelation, it is absolutely clear that the schizophrenic dream religion of which he writes has very little to do with the Islam of the Prophet, but is almost entirely to do with the Islam of muslims now.

When one looks towards the "Islamic" world, it is almost impossible to see the simple, tolerant, vibrant, outward-looking religion of the early years of Islam. After centuries of intellectual stultification how many muslims now stand out for their contribution to human understanding of creation? After centuries of political corruption and material decline, resulting in almost total colonisation by Christian Europe, how many "Islamic" countries could serve as an example of the peaceful, just and harmonious society that is claimed to be the inevitable result of the Islamic way of life? Closer to home, how many mosques in this country offer a vision of Islam which is compatible with an integrated life as a minority in a non-muslim society? How many show as much interest in understanding the society around them as they do in demanding that society understands them? How many contribute in any way to the community beyond their ethnic group? How many offer an example of the Islamic way of life which a non-muslim would find intelligible, let alone attractive? How many even welcome, let alone encourage, the casual non-muslim visitor within their doors? As Baal says in one of his Jahilian poems *"What kind of idea does 'Submission' seem today? One full of fear. An idea that runs away" (SV126).* Does this sound like a religion that in a hundred years spread from China to Spain? No, it is clearly not a book about Islam, but it is undeniably a book about the "muslims".

Control over truth

One sub-theme that threads its way throughout the book is that of Religion used as an instrument of control, and the way that tyrants justify oppression in the name of "God's Law" or "The Will of God". Yet despite the tremendous increase in his personal political power during the later years of his life, the Prophet showed none of the signs of the tyrant. He accrued no personal wealth and died a pauper, ate little and fasted often, and gave whatever he had to whoever asked. He refused to curse people, saying "I was sent to forgive not to curse", always spoke the truth, and in fact defined Islam as "the religion of truth and tolerance". He was described as the most smiling and laughing of men, and all who knew him loved him. When asked a question for which he had no answer, he would wait for Revelation and could not force or predict its coming, as is well known from an occasion early in his mission, when he promised a quick response but forgot to say "God willing", and to his great embarrassment was kept waiting several days.

It is obviously not a reference to Muhammad when Mahound *"just lay down the law and the angel would confirm it afterwards"* (SV365), but despite the Quranic verses which say that "there is no compulsion in religion", and Islam's clearly defined duty upon all Muslims to oppose tyranny, "Muslim" despots throughout history have decided what they wanted and then justified their actions by reference to the Quran, just as religious leaders have often first made up their minds, and then looked for apposite references. The parallel can be seen in Jahilia, where the despotic Hind sends out her commands in the form of *"epistles"* & *"bulls"* (SV360), terms more usually associated with the dogmatic pronouncements of organized religion. Thus the centuries have reduced the living and all-embracing principles of the flexible, subtle and tolerant Sharia, administered by pious and humble men in the Name of an All-merciful and All-compassionate God, to a sterile and calcified system usurped by the power-hungry. The patent desire of the vast body of Muslims for a system of law which conforms to the wishes of the Creator is now represented at a national level only by a handful of fierce punishments, hardly justifiable outside their original socio-political setting, yet suiting the Islamic perceptions of a few generals and all-powerful rulers, and used as a highly public example of the sincerity of their "Islamic" intentions.

Rules, rules, religion

On a local level, a myriad tyrants of a much more petty nature, have used a little knowledge and a minimum of references to justify their delineations of a compulsory system of behaviour apparently so specifically and minutely defined that few would dream of attempting to penetrate its complexities without their guidance. By constructing this elaborate system of rules they put endless barriers between simple (not simple-minded) Muslims and the simple behavioural principles expounded by the Prophet. To reduce the average Muslim to dependency on their advice they have turned the Straight Path into a maze. *"in those years Mahound - or should one say the Archangel Gibreel? - should one say Al-Lah? - became obsessed by law. Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning ones behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation - the recitation - told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep, and which sexual positions had received divine sanction, so that they learned that sodomy and the missionary position were approved of by the archangel, whereas the forbidden postures included all those in which the female was on top. Gibreel further listed the permitted and forbidden subjects of conversation, and earmarked the parts of the body which could not be scratched no matter how unbearably they might itch. He vetoed the consumption of prawns, those bizarre other-worldly creatures which no member of the faithful had ever seen, and required animals to be killed slowly, by bleeding, so that by experiencing their deaths to the full they might arrive at an understanding of the meaning of their lives, for it is only at the moment of death that living creatures understand that life has been real, and not a sort of dream. And Gibreel the archangel specified the manner in which a man should be buried, and how his property should be divided, so that Salman the Persian got to wondering what manner of God this was that sounded so much like a businessman"* (SV363/4).

Of all these *"rules, rules, rules"*, the Quranic Revelation includes only a concern for the just division of property, yet the rest are typical of the myriad stipulations which large numbers of Muslims now consider essential requirements for an "Islamic way of life". There are, of course, educated Muslims who would consider the above list not only to be unnecessary but even in most cases unIslamic. There are also the multitude of Muslims who by their total disregard for the mosque clearly show their opinion of whether or not such a view of religion is either practicable or relevant in our complex and rapidly changing modern world. Both groups consider the pure Islam of the Prophet to have little to do with these *"endlessly proliferating rules"* (SV365).

Popular religion and social conformity

But whereas it is easy to reject the mindless and sterile format of Islam that now so often stands in the place of the original, it is not so easy to ignore the life of the spirit and its integral connection with the Creator. Salman Rushdie instinctively recognises that this link has less to do with the imposition of the views of religious elite, and more to do with the simple understandings of God, a love for the Prophet, and the essential moral values of his example as shared between a Muslim

mother and her child. As with Gibreel, *"some of his night-sagas seem more bearable than others, and ... he feels almost pleased when the next narrative begins, extending his internal repertory, because at least it suggests that the deity whom he, Gibreel, has tried unsuccessfully to kill can be a God of love, as well as one of vengeance, power, duty, rules and hate; and it is, too, a nostalgic sort of tale, of a lost homeland; it feels like a return to the past"* (SV216).

The open-minded and inquisitive nature of the young child are soon expected to conform to familial or societal rules which he cannot understand, yet which he is expected to accept on trust and follow as a duty. But eventually it is not acceptable to demand that rules are followed without explanation *"... Abbu, Dad. Thirteen-year old Salahuddin, setting aside recent doubts and grievances, entered once again his childish adoration of his father, because he had, had, had worshipped him, he was a great father until you started growing a mind of your own, and then to argue with him was called a betrayal of his love, but never mind that now, I accuse him of becoming my supreme being, so that what happened was like a loss of faith ..."* (SV41).

As with many fathers, so with many religious leaders barricaded behind the walls of their autocracy. As the only proof of their dogmatic pudding lies in the afterlife, they consider comprehension an irrelevance and deny both the need for justifying their edicts and the right to question their validity. Much like when the prophetess Ayesha promises her followers that they can walk across the sea-bed to Makkah, saying to her faithful *"when the waters part, you will be saved. You will enter into the Glory of the Most High." 'What waters?' Mirza Saeed yelled. 'How will they divide?' 'Follow me,' Ayesha concluded, 'and judge me by their parting'"* (SV500).

Believers and hypocrites

Ayesha may be considered as simple-minded, strange or even mad, but her sincerity is not doubted, and she is seen as *"uncompromising; absolute; pure"* (SV500). But Rushdie is aware that a religion reduced to unquestioning faith leaves people prey to not only the ignorant, but something far more sinister, the hypocrite, and this theme is essential to an understanding of the book, and a key to the furore that surrounds it. For hypocrisy, like a symbiont, needs a religious and moral structure in which to manifest itself, and of its' nature is to be found in its' most virulent form in centres of religious power, and perhaps this is why hypocrisy is so often mentioned in the Quran and so rarely mentioned in the mosque. Of course, it could be said that those who follow without question are only getting what they ask for. *"What is an archangel but a puppet? Kathputli, marionette. The faithful bend us to their will"* (SV460) thinks Gibreel as he roams the streets of London.

Whereas most of the muslim community may be happy to live their lives with no more concern for the pronouncements of religious leaders than an occasional twinge of conscience, however, Salman Rushdie is much more aware that hypocrisy is a cancer that eats at the spiritual and intellectual heart of his community, and has no intention of keeping quiet about it. *"Hanif wasn't going without having his say, I've kept my mouth shut for too long, he cried, you people who call yourself so moral while you make fortunes off the misery of your own race"* (SV290). To take on those who's prestige and livelihoods depend on their control of the belief systems of the community requires a combination of a profound moral indignance, a strong established intellectual track record, reliable and powerful support systems, and a certain arrogance. Winning his various literary prizes clearly established Rushdie's status in the west and gave him the support of a system which has managed to keep him alive until now. His indignance in the face of what he call the "mind police" is apparent in his book, and he clearly has the arrogance of a man prepared to take on the world.

When Baal speaks to Abu Simbel he describes *"A poet's work To name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep."* (SV97) Now that the muslim world seems to have woken up, let us pray that it eventually manages to recognise the truth. The Quran and Hadith both emphatically state that one of the most distinctive characteristics of the hypocrites is that instead of the truth they tell lies. One of the most disturbing outcomes of the printing of this book is the way that religious leaders have been prepared to so consistently and volubly tell partial truth, distort the truth, and callously disregard the truth, loudly proselytizing an alternative reality based to a large extent on ignorance, but at its' heart on a tissue of lies. Those who consider that in God's Creation the truth must inevitably prevail should now be prepared to admit that they may have been mistaken, for I must assure them that to remain adamant is to consign themselves to ultimate association with hypocrisy.

Nowadays it is perhaps hard to read the Satanic Verses with an unjaundiced eye, but even now one thing must clearly stand out from the muslim hype. Far from being a dagger plunged at the heart of his muslim family, his affection for his community shines through, along with his affection for humanity in general. His non-judgemental attitude shows more of the tolerance recommended by the Prophet to his followers than most of those excoriating him from a position of holier-than-thou superiority. His affection is for the common man, and especially those disadvantaged and oppressed, focusing his invective only on those he sees as tyrants, oppressors and hypocrites. He shows compassion for whores, but none for pimps. For ten pages of the book, however, he deals with tyranny and hypocrisy by combining them into one symbolic character in another of Gibreel's recurrent nightmares. This character is the Imam.

The Imam

The Imam is not only a religious leader but also has a dream of political power. It is often said that there is no distinction between religion and state in Islam as there is in Western Europe now that we are no longer a part of the Holy Roman Empire. The Islamic tradition has always relied on the power of knowledge and the Word being able to counterbalance those with more temporal desires and the power of the Sword. Unfortunately, with the decline of knowledge in the muslim world the sword has come to rule virtually unchallenged while for obvious reasons still finding it useful to claim unity of religion and state. One part of the muslim world has always had a flavour of its own, however, and the Shia of Iran have for centuries had a formalized system of clergy wielding considerable temporal power. In their spiritual and mystical traditions, their ultimate leader is the Imam, and I have already mentioned the similarities between Gibreel's dream of the Imam and the history of Imam Khomeini, certainly sufficient to be easily noticed, as well as being far from complimentary. *"Who has not dreamed this dream, of being king for a day? - But the Imam dreams of more than a day; feels, emanating from his fingertips, the arachnid strings with which he will control the movement of history"* (SV209).

Rushdie is not a man to make his dream Imam so specific as to represent just one person, or even one branch of Islam, however, and in his chosen isolation from his loathed host culture and his idealisation of a foreign homeland he shares traits with any number of imams in British mosques today. *"The curtains, thick golden velvet, are kept shut all day, because otherwise the evil thing might creep into the apartment: foreignness, Abroad, the alien nation. The harsh fact that he is here and not There, upon which all his thoughts are fixed. On those rare occasions when the Imam goes out to take the Kensington air, at the centre of a square formed by eight young men in sunglasses and bulging suits, he folds his hands before him and fixes his gaze upon them, so that no element or particle of this hated city, - this sink of iniquities which humiliates him by giving him sanctuary, so that he must be beholden to it in spite of the lustfulness, greed and vanity of its ways, - can lodge itself, like a dust speck, in his eyes. When he leaves this loathed exile to return in triumph to that other city beneath the postcard-mountain, it will be a point of pride to be able to say that he remained in complete ignorance of the Sodom in which he had been obliged to wait; ignorant, and therefore unsullied, unaltered, pure"* (SV206).

Gibreel in his dream watches with horror, as the Imam's own dream of a triumphal return comes true, and the people having overthrown a political tyrant voluntarily accept another who this time speaks in the name of the spirit. *"Gibreel understands that the Imam, fighting by proxy as usual, will sacrifice him as readily as he did the hill of corpses at the palace gate ... sees the Imam grown monstrous, lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates; as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole"* (SV215). Rushdie recognises that when committed to a "great idea" one must expect to make an effort or endure some kind of suffering. This is given voluntarily and returns some benefit, much as the pain of physical effort can be rewarded with health and strength. In the service of the false truths of a tyrant, however, people all too often find that their voluntary efforts have been channelled into creating chains and prisons for themselves. *"With Mahound, there is always a struggle; with the Imam, slavery"* (SV234) clearly separates the Prophet from those who speak in his name, and suggests that Rushdie has very different opinions of the two categories.

Doubt and faith

The unquestioning Faith that enables believers to so readily submit to the service of the unscrupulous is another theme that Rushdie considers often in the book, along with the doubt that opposes it. Two attitudes are expressed with regard to faith and its' relationship with doubt. The prophetess Ayesha offers her followers the certainty of *"a home in Paradise"* (SV481), and her angel opposes doubt to faith, *"Last night the angel did not sing,' she said. 'He told me, instead, about doubt, and how the Devil makes use of it. I said, but they doubt me, what can I do? He answered only proof can silence doubt'"* (SV499). No such proof is possible, of course, with regard to the six essential aspects of Islamic Faith, which is why they require faith in the first place, and indeed the Quran with its' eternal relevance for mankind posits doubt as intrinsic to the human condition. The Prophet doubted the Revelation when he saw Gibreel stretching from the zenith to the horizon, doubting his own sanity before the evidence of his own eyes. Similarly Mahound doubts his Revelation, remaining uncertain of his salvation to the end, as any sincere muslim must if not to suffer the penalty of the sin of presumption. Even the Prophet's Companions could not be sure of their place in the Garden, which would have been to have denied the requirement of Allah that we experience "fear and hope".

"Question: What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt. ... Human beings ... can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes. Of behind-their-own eyes. Of what, as they sink heavily-lidded, transpires behind closed peepers" (SV92). And here is where Salman Rushdie in his apparent preference for nominal agnosticism falls into the trap of accepting the frame of reference of those whose opinions he so thoroughly rejects. For indeed human beings can doubt anything, which is why it is not doubt but precisely that closed disbelief the choice of which is the opposite of Faith in Islam. How many like Mr.Rushdie can see quite clearly the reality of human existence, yet having been raised in a forest of "Islamic" rules and regulations can no longer see the wood for the trees? How I pray that one day they may rediscover their spiritual and intellectual home, and find that there is indeed something there to love.

Truth and reality, good and evil

The discussion of Doubt and Faith is paralleled by themes of Good and Evil, Truth and Falsity, "Well, then. - Are we coming closer to it? Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different types of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous - that is joined to and arising from his past that in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be; - so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as 'true' whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention; his preferred revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity - call this 'evil' While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered 'good' by virtue of wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. - But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy? - Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, 'pure', - an utterly fantastic notion! - cannot, must not, suffice. No! Let's rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is. - That, in fact, we fall towards it naturally, that is, not against our natures.the true appeal of evil being the seductive ease with which one may embark upon that road" (SV427).

Trust in Scripture

When muslims so readily dismiss such subtle and complex arguments with a simple-minded caterwaul of abuse is it any wonder that poor Salman concluded that his unanswered challenges had no answer in Islam? Why be surprised that he grew up to feel that the truth he discovered for himself could not be matched or even improved on by any truth within Islam? Should we not have expected some muslim child somewhere to grow up and give vent to the rage and frustration he feels at the intellectual poverty of his Islamic nurture? Not just anger but fear would come with the dawning realization of the insubstantial nature of the philosophical underpinnings of his life, and Salman deals with all these mixed emotions when describing how Gibreel dreams of Salman who has dreamed he is Gibreel. "*Maybe I hadn't dreamed of myself as Gibreel, Salman recounted. 'Maybe I was Shaitan.' The realization of this possibility gave him his diabolical idea. After that, when he sat at the Prophet's feet, writing down rules rules rules, he began, surreptitiously, to change things. The truth is that what I expected when I made that first tiny change what I wanted - was to read it back to the Prophet, and he'd say, What's the matter with you, Salman, are you going deaf? And I'd say, Oops, O God, bit of a slip, how could I, and correct myself. But it didn't happen; and now I was writing the Revelation and nobody was noticing, and I didn't have the courage to own up. I was scared silly, I can tell you. Also: I was sadder than I have ever been. and I went out of his tent with tears in my eyes. There is no bitterness like that of a man who finds out he has been believing in a ghost*" (SV367/8).

It is ludicrously simplistic to suggest that Salman Rushdie meant this passage to be taken literally as historical fact. Quite apart from the dream boxes with which he surrounds it, such bald meanings are just not his style. As I described earlier, Gibreel's revelations to Mahound only occasionally have words in common with the Quran. The story of the "revelation" is used to deal with several themes, but clearly the main ones deal with man's frequent lack of scruples when dealing with scripture, a fact muslims have no difficulty in facing when considering the scriptures of different faiths. Of course, I wouldn't be a muslim if I didn't believe the Quran to be profoundly different in its completeness and the perfection of its preservation, but the "revelation" in this book is not supposed to be the Quran, and its' content must be looked at in its' context. Nonetheless, attitudes towards scripture are obviously pivotal in the book, for it is in the history of the Revelation that one encounters the muslim tradition which gives the book its' name - the now notorious Satanic Verses.

The Satanic Verses

In the vast libraries of Islamic traditions and exegesis, the story of the Satanic Verses is occasionally mentioned, notably in Al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd, as well as a few others. There is no support for the story in Hadith literature, and few commentators of any sort give it any credence. Yet muslims such as Al-Tabari did not try to avoid challenges to their faith, as is clear from the fact that the tradition has survived. They would not have cared that modern Orientalists would brandish the tale as sign of weakness in the Quranic revelation, as though they had discovered it for themselves. Al-Tabari could hardly have believed that the ummah would eventually be so weak as to prefer to bury its' head in the sand rather than face an intellectual challenge it had already outfaced several centuries before.

When Salman Rushdie describes how Mahound "*returns to the city as quickly as he can, to expunge the foul verses that reek of brimstone and sulphur, to strike them from the record for ever and ever, so that they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and unwrite their story*" (SV123), the story may question the validity of Prophetic judgement of Divine Revelation, but its' importance to modern muslims is in the recognisable response of those who prefer blanket denial to facing its' logical ramifications. Anyway, as ever, the book's meaning is not so simple, with Gibreel revealing Satanic Verses to Ayesha, and in Britain Saladin Chamcha quoting Satanic Verses to Gibreel, quite apart from Gibreel's verses to Mahound in Jahilia. The issue is not really one of historicity, but more to do with knowledge and ignorance, doubt and faith within the modern muslim community.

It is almost impossible to believe that Quranic verses could be changed in the lifetime of the Prophet when they were a constant topic of conversation, continuously recited during prayer, and the community was small enough for such knowledge to be cohesive. Few muslims would know any better if you confidently misquoted Quran nowadays, however. How many times have I heard muslims say "Quran says" as a preface to talking nonsense. How many imams know the Quran in Arabic from start to finish, but feel there is no need for them to be able to translate its meaning. Yet this knowledge, so patently superficial in its' content, is considered sufficient to make their opinions on any number of issues inviolable. How many nominal muslims recognise that the system doesn't work, tacitly showing it by their avoidance of the mosque? They don't know much about religion, but then again, you don't need to know how something works to know that it isn't working.

Apostacy and blasphemy

And so we come to the final sub-theme related to the theme of religion, and that is one that is integrally bound up with the religious belief and practices of the modern muslim community, as well as being of great interest in the light of the response to Mr.Rushdie's novel. Over and again the book returns to the theme of apostacy and blasphemy, and though blasphemy is a word that has been bandied about with gay abandon in recent months, apostacy is one that is heard much less frequently from those numerous muslims like *"Mirza Saeed, who had forgotten almost all the Arabic verses that had once been stuffed into him by rote, and could scarcely remember when to stand with his hands held in front of him like a book, when to genuflect, when to press his forehead to the ground, stumbled through the ceremony with growing self-disgust"* (SV496).

For there are many happily accepted as muslim by the community, even prepared to protest loudly against "blasphemy", identifying themselves with the Prophet even though their religious practice bears a stronger resemblance to that of the Jahilians, who after their nominal submission still ate their pork, worshipped their deities, and fornicated behind the curtain (SV378). In fact one aspect of Islam which makes it easy prey for hypocrites, is that all you need to be a muslim is to be prepared to say you are one. But the inquisitive mind raised in an atmosphere where questions are anathematized, whatever the guilt involved cannot help but wonder if things are not quite so certain, and this theme is encountered very early in the novel.

"Sometimes, though, he caught himself in the act of forming blasphemous thoughts, for example when without meaning to, as he drifted off to sleep in his cot This dream brought him awake, flushing hotly for shame, and after that he began to worry about the impurity in his make-up that could create such terrible visions. Mostly, however, his religious faith was a low-key thing, a part of him that required no more special attention than any other" (SV22). As the child becomes a man, the infantile relationship with his philosophical roots may lose its' guilt, and inconsistencies manifest themselves through more adult passions. *"If love is a yearning to be like (even to become) the beloved, then hatred, it must be said, can be engendered by the same ambition, when it cannot be fulfilled"* (SV428). But for those who have been raised without being shown the true meaning of faith, as Rushdie points out, *"Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy"* (SV380), a fine Islamic defense for the author in his present predicament if ever I have heard one.

With no belief and no real thought of a death-threat, it was possible for the subject of blasphemy itself to be treated irreverently and light-heartedly. Gibreel's Jahilian dream, it is suggested, will be turned into a Bombay movie. *"The film was to be - what else - a theological, but of a new type. It would be set in an imaginary and fabulous city made of sand, and would recount the story of the encounter between a prophet and an archangel; also the temptation of the prophet, and his choice of the path of purity and not that of base compromise. 'It is a film,' the producer, Sisodia, informed Cine-Blitz, 'about how newness enters the world.' - But would it not be seen as blasphemous, a crime against . . . - 'Certainly not,' Billy Battuta insisted. 'Fiction is fiction; facts are facts. Our purpose is not to make some farrago like that movie The Message in which, whenever Prophet Muhammad (on whose name be peace!) was heard to speak, you saw only the head of his camel, moving its mouth. That - excuse me for pointing out - had no class. We are making a high-taste, quality picture. A moral tale: like - what do you call them? - fables'"* (SV272).

Seeing the light

But even adult arrogance cannot shake off childhood fears, and in fact any adult with the brains to attempt to face down the powers of hypocrisy and ignorance, must quail a little at the personal outcome in prospect. *"Mahound is coming' he said. This flat statement filled Baal with the most profound terror. 'What's that got to do with me?' he cried, 'What does he want? It was a long time ago - a lifetime - more than a lifetime. What does he want?' ... 'You're the immigrant,' Baal remembered. 'The Persian. Sulaiman.' The Persian smiled his crooked smile. 'Salman,' he corrected. 'Not wise, but peaceful.' 'You were one of the closest to him,' Baal said, perplexed. 'The closer you are to a conjurer,' Salman bitterly replied, 'the easier to spot the trick'"* (SV363). Indeed, many would not have considered writing the Satanic Verses to be the wisest course of action for someone hoping for a peaceful life, but once having set off in the direction of publicly exploring his spiritual doubt, the project must have taken on an unstoppable momentum of its' own, *"Now that you've started," Baal said, coming into the room, "you may as well take all the curtains down. No point trying to keep the sun out any more"* (SV388).

In another passage from early in the book, Rushdie takes us through the sequence of events which begin with Gibreel contracting a near fatal disease, and conclude with him having regained his health but in the process lost his faith. As his illness gets worse he goes from spending *"every minute of consciousness calling upon God"*, through thinking *"that he was being punished"*, through anger at the injustice and lack of response, to *"a terrifying emptiness, an isolation"*, pleading *"ya Allah, just be there"*, and finally finding *"that he no longer needed there to be anything to feel. On that day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began."* *"But when Gibreel regained his strength, it became clear that he had changed, and to a startling degree, because he had lost his faith", "And to prove to himself that non-existence of God, he now stood in the dining-hall of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face." ... "Don't you get it?" he shouts to Alleluiah Cone "No thunderbolt. That's the point.", to which Alleluiah Cone replies "You got your life back. That's the point."* (SV29/30)

It is after this crisis, and Gibreel's decision to eat pigmeat in a blatant rejection of his religious heritage, that his schizophrenic serial dreams begin, and Rushdie begins to explore what is involved in unbelief and apostasy, as well as discussing what is meant by blasphemy. It is perhaps to be expected that when he looks around the world he doesn't find the crime of the blasphemer too offensive in comparison with others. *"What he was rejecting was a portrait of himself and Gibreel as monstrous. Monstrous, indeed: the most absurd of ideas. There were real monsters in the world - mass-murdering dictators, child rapists"* (SV407). Looking around at what is going on in the muslim world, I must say I tend to agree with that. How sad that "muslim" leaders can attempt genocide in three separate areas of the world with little or no condemnation from the ranks of the ulema or the IOC. Yet one man can write a book attacking hypocrisy and mosques and ministers close ranks. The Prophet for whom they claim to have such reverence and admiration would weep to see the present behaviour of those who claim to follow his example and speak in his name.

But this ever present muslim nightmare is a graphic example of the centuries of corruption in our community since the pure Islam of the days when the Prophet was a living exemplar and the Quran was in process of revelation. Our problems may seem to have started with the Prophet's death, but our Islam would make no sense if we did not trust that the Creator ultimately knows best. Quite the opposite to our own, Gibreel's Satanic dream comes to a close with the death of his notional Prophet, yet the conclusion of his story is one recognisable in our own, a close paraphrase the strange choice of which suggests that Mr.Rushdie might not be quite as much of an unbeliever as he sometimes insinuates. *"But Ayesha wiped her eyes, and said: 'If there be any here who worshipped the Messenger, let them grieve, for Mahound is dead; but if there be any here who worship God, then let them rejoice, for He is surely alive.'... It was the end of the dream"* (SV394).

In fact, Salman frequently gives the impression that it is not so much that he doesn't believe, but that he refuses to accept other people's simplistic definitions. For example, he often quotes Blake, and at one point he quotes some fairly dark spiritual imagery from Henry James, with a flippant addendum which suggests that the extract goes deep enough to make him feel uncomfortable. *"Every man who has reached even his intellectual teens begins to suspect that life is no farce; that it is not genteel comedy even; that it flowers and fructifies on the contrary out of the profoundest tragic depths of the essential dearth in which its subject's roots are plunged. The natural inheritance of everyone who is capable of spiritual life is an unsubdued forest where the wolf howls and the obscene bird of night chatters.' Take that, kids"* (SV397). For what it's worth, it is my personal opinion that a man who recognizes eternity in the life of the spirit must experience some difficulty when trying to call himself an unbeliever.

The death threat

There is yet one more minor motif, however, which in the light of events since the book's publication assumes a more prominent profile. On several occasions Rushdie deals with need of the religious authoritarian to eliminate by condemning to death apostates and blasphemers. *"In sum, Baal had arrived at godlessness. He began, stumblingly, to move beyond the idea of gods and leaders and rules, and to perceive that his story was so mixed up with Mahound's that some great resolution was necessary. That this resolution would in all probability mean his death neither shocked nor bothered him overmuch"* (SV379). Of course we are all brave in facing up to dangers when we are only facing them in theory, and "I didn't think it would happen to me" is a common phrase heard at the scene of accidents. But clearly at some level of his awareness Rushdie knew the kind of risk that he was running, though I am sure that he underestimated the ignorance and unscrupulousness of those most likely to condemn him.

Now genocide may be unsavoury, but charges of incompetence and hypocrisy put jobs at risk, so Salman Rushdie was used to show just what would happen to any others who might decide to voice similar feelings. *"And now Mahound is coming in triumph; so I shall lose my life after all. And his power has grown too great for me to unmake him now.' Baal asked: 'Why are you sure he will kill you?' Salman the Persian answered: 'It's his Word against mine'"* (SV367). Here one can see that Mahound is not simply a parody of the Prophet as has been suggested, but the symbol of all those modern-day claimants of his mantle prepared to be judge and jury in his name. For it is not the Prophet sent as "a mercy to all beings" who is attempting to kill Salman Rushdie, but practising zealots from his cultural family. And they treat him with the same mercy and compassion that the terrorist Sikhs show for their own in a jumbo-jet above the channel, *"She looked straight into Jalandri's eyes and pronounced his death sentence. 'You first. Apostate traitor bastard.' Jalandri had become the first target*

because of his decision to give up the turban and cut his hair, which made him a traitor to his faith, a shorn Sirdarji. Cut-Sird. A seven-letter condemnation; no appeal" (SV86).

So these are just some of the many themes that thread their way through Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, and I make no claims for the list to be seen as complete or exhaustive. Those with different interests and preferences will no doubt see things in a very different way, but that is the nature of fiction, and what seems to be critical in this case is that Muslims break away from the bizarre idea that the book has one clear and simply definable meaning. If Muslims are to take their place in the English linguistic heritage it is imperative that they accept that the book is seen as a unity, is read in its entirety, and can only be understood in its cultural context. Now as decontextualised extracts have been the main springboard for abuse and condemnation of the book, I thought that I would next consider these extracts in more detail.

Quotes out of context

In dealing with the novel Muslim commentators have frequently if unwittingly displayed ignorance and bias, but have almost invariably dealt with the subject as though they are clear channels highlighting truth without distortion. I hope that some of the examples I have given so far show just how much their egos and intellectual and linguistic frailties have dominated their opinions of the book they have been reading. Although not all have gone as far as Ahmad Deedat in wilfully butchering the text to give a different meaning to its content, all that I have read so far are guilty of simplifying the book to suit their comprehension, and lacking sufficient humility to consider the possibility that their opinions could be mistaken. One must remember that the book is not just the page or two that they have selected, but the more than five hundred pages that they left out.

Muhammad and Mahound

The way they have reduced Mahound to a simple insulting parody of the Prophet is a typical case in point, for the intricacy of Salman Rushdie's approach to the character may be too subtle for many to appreciate, but that intricacy itself must surely be apparent to all, and to pretend that it isn't there is yet another example of Muslims responding to a problem they can deal with rather than the problem with which they have been presented. The threat to Islam comes not from Salman Rushdie, but from a degenerated system which seems incapable of providing or permitting a more adequate Muslim response. The book may deal with man and God and "great ideas" in all their generalities, but in the character of Mahound we see the key to Rushdie's personal connection to the religious traditions of his family and community.

Of course the character of Mahound is closely linked to Prophet Muhammad. The religious understanding of anyone born into the Muslim community cannot help but be shaped around traditions linked with his name. In Gibreel's nightmares there is an obvious intrusion of historical facts drawn from the *Seerah*, and the few short passages which deal with mythical history of Mahound are often unmistakable based on a Makkah or Madinan original. But to suggest that Mahound is meant to be understood as the Prophet is, quite frankly, ridiculous as anyone with a reasonable grasp of English should be able to tell. With the historical link, aspects of the Prophet can be seen in Mahound, but they are relatively minor content compared to the use of Mahound as a literary symbol. Mahound is the foundation of a Muslim child's family values, as well as the threatening ogre of his guilty conscience. Mahound is the attitudes of the mosque centred zealots, their repression of imagination and intelligence, their pomposity and lack of humour, their lost compassion and mercy. Mahound is the Muslim Asian community, its business acumen, its codes of honour, and its sexual obsessions and taboos. Mahound is an individual Muslim human being struggling to make sense of his inner voices and live his life in accordance with his conscience despite colossal pressure from the society that surrounds him.

Of all the facets of Mahound, obviously the most sympathetic and attractive are those most closely based on the Prophet. But the various aspects are not discrete, and exist concurrently in the one mixed personality, so it is indeed possible on one level to see the light of Muhammad in Mahound throughout his story, even though simultaneously on other levels he may be reflecting more unpleasant modern aspects of "Muslim" life. Considering the only opinions that have been vocalized over the last year, it may now be hard for some people to believe that someone sincerely trying to shape his life on the Prophet's example could possibly have read the *Satanic Verses* without offense, but strange as it may seem that was the case. Although refusing to dehumanize the Prophet with exaggerated reverence, Salman Rushdie in his treatment of the Mahound passages shows nothing but respect. And how could he do otherwise when faced with the *Seerah* to contrast with the behaviour of "Muslims", *"From his mother Naima Najmuddin he heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if inaccuracies had crept into her versions he wasn't interested in knowing what they were. 'What a man!' he thought. 'What angel would not wish to speak to him?'" (SV22).*

Why Mahound?

But despite the insistence of many that in his Jahilian dream chapters Rushdie is talking of the Prophet, the words of the book make it apparent that this is precisely the opposite of his intention, and he even explains in detail why he chooses a mediaeval European insult for the name of his character instead. With the use of the name Mahound, he considers the

inevitability of inheriting the centuries of cultural prejudice, included within one group by blood and mother tongue, yet living in another whose heritage sees him as a despised enemy. By naming his notional Prophet Mahound, far from disparaging his roots, he is clearly accepting his differences and fighting against their disadvantages under the banner of a former term of disparagement. *"His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given, but he won't answer to that here; nor, though he's well aware of what they call him, to his nickname in Jahilia down below Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound"* (SV93). Why not, when so many of our present society have still not learned to pronounce Muhammad's name.

There are facets of Mahound's behaviour, however, which have rarely been mentioned as divergent from the example of Muhammad, perhaps because the Sunnah of the Prophet is generally supposed to justify such behaviour. Mahound's attitude to women, for example, treating them only as mothers or children rather than as partners, and the incarceration of wives within their homes are often accepted as the preferred "Islamic" way of life. Yet these attitudes are not the way of Muhammad as known to those who have studied him, his family and society. Muhammad said "the best of you are the kindest to their wives", and his wives were far from repressed and dominated (Ayesha rode on the back of an armoured camel leading an army of 10,000 men in battle). Mahound's attitudes are the cultural distortion of the Sunnah by Muslims through history, which can be seen culminating in some of the more narrow-minded and repressive of modern "Muslim" societies. It just so happens that they are particularly prevalent amongst many Muslims from the Indian subcontinent today, who for all their protestations of "difference but equality", have differences that are readily apparent while their equality is hard to see. In this case Mahound is obviously "the Muslims" more than he is Muhammad.

Mercy triumphant

When returning in triumph to Makkah the Prophet could even forgive Hind for her bloodthirsty murder of members of his family, and in Jahilia Mahound does likewise. *"Hind, who had joined the Jahilian army disguised as a man, using sorcery to deflect all spears and swords, seeking out her brother's killer through the storm of war. Hind who butchered the Prophet's uncle, and ate old Hamza's liver and his heart"* (SV361). Mahound even forgives Salman the Persian for distorting the verses of the Book, but Mahound does not forgive Baal for his satirical verses laughing at him. *"So he was sentenced to be beheaded, within the hour, and as soldiers manhandled him out of the tent towards the killing ground, he shouted over his shoulder: 'Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive'"* (SV392).

In the face of years of persecution and personal abuse, the Prophet's tolerance and forgiveness were matchless. He refused even to curse his enemies, saying "I was sent to forgive, not to curse", and only prayed that their heads be pressed to the ground in voluntary prayer. So why would Baal expect this unforgiving behaviour from Mahound? On February 18th 1989, Salman Rushdie issued a statement in which he said "I recognise that Moslems in many parts of the world are genuinely distressed by the publication of my novel. I profoundly regret the distress that publication has occasioned to the sincere followers of Islam". On February 19th, the Iran News Agency issued a statement from the Imam Khomeini which replied "Even if Salman Rushdie repents and becomes the most pious man of time, it is incumbent on every Muslim to employ everything he has got, his life and his wealth, to send him to hell".

I mentioned earlier that according to Rushdie any "great idea" is asked two important questions. The first, "what kind of idea are you?" occurs on several occasions in the story, but not until Mahound returns in triumph does he finally face the second of the two, *"to dream of a thing is very different from being faced with the fact of it. ...And now, Mahound, on your return to Jahilia, time for the second question: How do you behave when you win? When your enemies are at your mercy and your power is absolute; what then?"* (SV3669). In the case of the Prophet Muhammad in Makkah, his response was unimaginable to the vanquished. Facing those who for twenty years had devoted themselves to the persecution and destruction of his community, the Prophet's generosity, mercy and compassion were overwhelming. Is it too much to ask that his followers show a little of the same to one of their own sons who is actually guilty of nothing more vicious than ridiculing the pompous and abusing the hypocrites?

God

For I can assure you that this book contains no blasphemy, though it does discuss the subject. Now "blasphemy" is an English word, and not strictly speaking part of the Islamic tradition, and its meaning of "speaking contempt or indignity of God" (Chambers) has been so stretched in this secular multicultural society that during the debate on the Satanic Verses it has seemed at times as though everyone involved is using their own definition, not the best way to go about making sense of a subject. Unfortunately for Islam, Salman Rushdie has had more sense to speak about the concept of blasphemy than almost any of his Muslim critics so far, but let us disregard those who demand the logical nonsense of "no-one should be allowed to say anything bad about anyone else's religious beliefs" and consider Rushdie's attitude to the Muslim understanding of God.

Who knows what understanding of the eternal is lodged in Salman Rushdie's soul, but he clearly wants to disown the nonsense of God as defined by muslim popular culture. It is not unbelief to disassociate oneself from a God defined in terms that are more suited to a businessman. When travelling with Indian muslims I remember feeling intense frustration at the limitation of their vision, and writing home despairingly of how "they talk of God as though He is a cash-register". Of course, what is important to Allah is not a man's intelligence but his piety and good behaviour, so I did not feel it necessary to confront the ideas of those simple muslims with intellectual challenges that they were unlikely to be able to deal with, and that might confuse and damage their faith without offering them anything more useful to them in its place. It is unfortunately the case, however, that in the muslim world there are many who are far from having the simple untrained intellect of the peasant, highly educated in secular subjects yet whose knowledge in religious matters is stuck in concepts they learned when they were small children.

It is these people for whom Salman Rushdie is writing, and who are best able to evaluate what he is saying, but how many have considered the subject important enough to apply their minds to it. There may have been little purpose in my challenging the Islam of illiterate muslims on an Indian train with theological argument, but Rushdie is a writer with a global reputation who is not writing simple stories for peasant-folk, but a conceptual discourse to take its place in literary history. It is insane to expect him to restrict his language to what is universally intelligible and already defined as acceptable. No matter if he stubbornly refuses to use the God-terminology of his family traditions, or even if his response is now hardened by bravado and anger engendered by his appalling treatment at the hands of muslims, we must consider if a man is truly an unbeliever who might prefer to express his belief through the words of William Blake, "*I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing*" (SV305).

As a general rule Salman's critics are not too interested in theological definitions, however, and are mainly concerned with perceived insults against the Prophet, his wives and companions. This is perhaps inevitable as the faith of common people, particularly those from the Indian sub-continent, often revolves around a formalized reverence for the Prophet and his family. But this reverential trend has a tendency towards the Christian heresy of Divinization of the Messenger. If we ignore the Messengers human flaws, their example is removed so far beyond our grasp that being impossible to achieve we see no point in even trying to make the effort. "*Bilal bellows loyally ... I have faith in him, in the Prophet. He won't break. Hamza offers only a gentle rebuke; Oh Bilal, how many times must he tell you? Keep your faith for God. The Messenger is only a man*" (SV105).

The Companions

What is true for the Prophet in this regard must be accepted as even more important in the case of his companions, and it is muslims who are the losers if they are incapable of imagining how non-muslims thought of them at the time. "*Abu Simbel approaches the area, halts a little way off. In the enclosure is a small group of men. The water-carrier Khalid is there, and some sort of bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman, and to complete this trinity of scum there is the slave Bilal, the one Mahound freed, and enormous black monster, this one, with a voice to match his size. The three idlers sit on the enclosure wall. 'That bunch of riff-raff,' Abu Simbel says. 'Those are your targets. Write about them; and their leader, too.' Baal, cannot conceal his disbelief 'You don't have to worry about them. What do you think? That Mahound's one God will bankrupt your temples? Three-sixty versus one, and the one wins? Can't happen.' Giggling Baal can't stop. 'A revolution of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves ... wow, Grandee. I'm really scared'" (SV101).*

We may now look on the Companions as stars in the sky, but we need to understand that they were once seen as riff-raff and a bunch of no-hopers if we are to grasp the enormity of their transformation by the Message. The fact that it was indeed "a revolution of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves" (as well as others) that spread so rapidly around the world is an essential part of the realization of its' miraculous nature. But to associate the Jahilian companions only with their Makkan counterparts is to oversimplify and miss much of their meaning, for as with Mahound, his companions in Jahilia have many more implications. Salman for one, may have been the name of a Companion, but it is also the name of the author, who obviously used the name as a humorous and ironic reference to the Islamic source of his own identity.

This may seem self-evident, but the muslim response has largely been so mindless that I feel the need to state the obvious. Such as the fact that the muslim community is full of other Salmans, Bilals and Khalids, whose lives share many features with Mahound's Jahilian followers. "*Mahound's three disciples are washing at the well of Zamzam. In the sand-city, their obsession with water makes them freakish. Ablutions, always ablutions, the legs up to the knees, the arms down to the elbows, the head down to the neck. Dry-torsoed, wet-limbed and damp-headed, what eccentrics they look! Splish, splosh, washing and praying. These are easy targets for Baal's pen*" (SV104). Indeed they are, and it simply is not good enough to squeal with fury because someone points it out unless you are prepared to look at the reason why you object to the ridicule in the first place.

The fact is that other people may find the wudhu and the salat quite bizarre, and this is only to be expected as they have no understanding of their purpose and practicality. For a muslim who understands their significance it doesn't matter what other people think. Unfortunately, it is undeniably the case that most muslim children are raised with no more understanding of

prayer and wudhu than that they are compulsory religious duties. For this reason it may be possible that some may avoid these duties for fear of the ridicule of those around them. But anyone who knows the muslim community also knows that the vast majority discard these obligations at the earliest possible opportunity, considering them an irrelevance even though most would get somewhat evasive if asked for their opinions. It is quite undeniable that the worst ridicule of the prayer and the wudhu comes from muslims themselves, and to pillory Rushdie for voicing his doubts is outrageously hypocritical.

The whores

Let us now deal with the subject of whether or not the book suggests the Prophet's wives were whores, which if true would obviously be appallingly insulting to muslims. I must say that reading the book as one born to an English speaking family and at home with the novel form, I found this interpretation of the whore scenes quite incredible, in fact, it is almost impossible to believe that he could have written the words he did if that is what he was trying to say. But here is the trap into which Rushdie has written himself, for in the face of those who insist that his words have a specific meaning of their definition, as a writer of fiction there is no way that he can give a contrary specific meaning to extracts from the book without intrinsically denying the nature of the literary form he is using. All he can say is "that is not what it says" for the words can have as many meanings as there are readers, but in the whore chapters the meaning that jumps up off the page is that those who sell themselves while speaking in the names of the Prophet's family, the whores, are the hypocritical Imams.

Every muslim knows that every tyrannical despot in muslim history has had his imams justifying his actions, and even naming their mosques after their bloodstained benefactors. Every modern "muslim" heroin manufacturer and trader has local ulema telling him that it is O.K. Every muslim knows that the muslim world is thick with religious leaders using the Quran and the Sunnah to justify a grotesquely authoritarian and repressive view of Islam, not for the benefit of Allah but to increase their personal power and feed their vanity. Of course, not only the imams stand to gain from having reputations as "good muslims", and by now every "muslim" dictator has learned that to unite the people behind their leadership, especially when they are needed for a "holy" war, it is invaluable to turn prayer and pilgrimage into a photo-opportunity. Now as we know, in Islamic law there is no difference between what is permitted for the rich and powerful and what is permitted for the poor, so next time you go to Makkah try taking a camera into the Haram-al-Sharif and see what is the response of the local religious and political authorities, then think about it for a while.

The distinction between what is permitted for those with power as opposed to those without also extends to what is permitted for their intellectual consumption. The powerful may well be able to afford the liberality of western education, but access to dangerous ideas of freedom are rarely permitted for their people and censorship is rife in the muslim world. Many of those in positions of religious power also feel that they have exclusive knowledge of the "true" form of Islam, and are happy to exercise their powers of censorship over any books that challenge their opinions. What is at stake is the definition of orthodoxy and the essentials of the Islamic way of life, and as the muslim world tries to come to terms with the media explosion with its' inevitable transfer of communications power to an ever wider cross-section of the people, those interested in central control must be starting to feel a bit desperate.

Certainly the reaction to the Satanic Verses has smacked of desperation. But perhaps Salman Rushdie, having lived in the west for so long made a serious error of judgement. Did he really think that those he accuses would not be stung into action? Did he expect to be able to point to the reality of what he had written in the book and that would be sufficient to settle the truth of the matter? Did he expect the hypocrites to act like English gentlemen as opposed to disregarding all scruples? But more to the point, did he really expect them to see themselves reflected in his descriptions, and if they did not see themselves was it not then inevitable that they would see the insults as directed at the Prophet and his family? Did he not anticipate the aberrant decoding, or did he just not care?

He really should have known, as he describes the situation perfectly in his book, when the whores after using the names of the Prophet's wives for some time are finally arrested. *"The twelve whores realized, soon after their arrest, that they had grown so accustomed to their new names that they couldn't remember the old ones"* (SV390). The fact that one sees someone as a hypocrite does not mean that they do not see the Prophet entirely in their own image, and see any challenge to their own behaviour as a rejection of the behaviour model of the Prophet himself. So having anticipated the whores reactions as well as anticipating Baal's death sentence, Salman Rushdie may be suffering a serious injustice but he can't say he didn't see it coming.

Abraham

But just one final example of a quote taken out of context, and I almost missed it, just as when I read it in the book. For much has been made of an insult to Abraham, calling him a "bastard", yet in the reading I was halfway down the next page before I realized that I had gone past it. For the text reads like Rushdie trying hard to write from a "women's-lib" perspective, and in the context the word "bastard" is so innocuous you hardly notice it is there. *"In ancient time the patriarch Ibrahim came into this valley with Hagar and Ismail, their son. Here, in this waterless wilderness, he abandoned her. She*

asked him, can this be God's will? He replied, it is. And left, the bastard. From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. He moves in mysterious ways: men say" (SV95).

In fact, of all the quotes used to attack the book this is the hardest to justify, not being placed in the mouth of a character and as far as I can see not having any symbolic function. Of course, if he had left out the comma it could have been justifiably applied to Ismail, but in the event its' only justification is in its' necessity for the literary style. This is not one of the most successful passages of the book, but then it's not very long either, and it comes to something that the only true basis I can find to justify all the muslim furore is that in trying to achieve a certain style of writing Rushdie uses a word to describe the Prophet Abraham that you can hear on any British high street used by mothers as a term of affection for their infants.

CONCLUSION

Your choice

This then is the way that I understood the book, and though I make no claims for my critique as a standard interpretation, I hope that at least it has shown that there is another way to read the book than that which most muslim leaders at present insist upon. But insistence that a thing is true does not help to make it so, *"Blake again, Allie thought. Then I asked: does a firm persuasion that a thing is so make it so? He - i.e. Isaiah - replied. all poets believe that it does. & in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion of any thing"* (SV338). Unfortunately the pain of sincere muslims is being invoked within them by leaders unwavering in their certainty and consumed by rage. You can, if you wish, continue to trust their opinions if you think that they are better equipped to judge the book than I, but remember that they also usually suggest that you avoid reading the book for yourself. Personally I would prefer that if you have read this essay you read the book and form your own opinion as to whether you think my interpretation makes sense, and if so communicate your opinion to those who have not read the book and think otherwise. The choice is yours as to whether you want to make up your own mind or not.

I do not think the book is blasphemous, even if it is most certainly imbued with arrogance, and considering Rushdie's established reputation perhaps he feels that is justified, yet he still manages to retain a humorous critical awareness of the possibility, *"Saladin found Gibreel's revelations"* (about his Archangelic dreams) *"pathetic, anticlimactic, what was so strange if his dreams characterized him as the angel, dreams do every damn thing, did it really display more than a banal kind of egomania?"* (SV83). But it is not just a lack of humility that has resulted in his being pilloried, but his lack of humility in the face of those who as the representatives of God demand it, as Sylvester says when he is in the dock, *"I stand here because I have chosen to occupy the place of the uppity nigger. I am here because I have not been willing to seem reasonable. I am here for my ingratitude"* (SV414).

For whatever the flaws of Rushdie's personality they should not be allowed to influence our judgement in matters that can be evaluated on more objective grounds. If someone tells me that a book says something, I do not have to base my judgement on other people's opinions or TV interviews, or hearsay about the author's public persona or private peccadillos. To judge what has been written I can read the book. *"Jumpy turned his palms outward. In his personal life, he owned, the guy's frankly a piece of shit. But that doesn't mean he disembowels senior citizens; you don't have to be an angel to be innocent"* (SV412).

The meaning of belief

Strangely enough, Rushdie himself sometimes gives the impression that he in fact believes he is guilty according to Islam, but in the need to remain true to his principles is forced to put a brave face on it, and if necessary pay the ultimate price for his refusal to compromise. Yet in seeing his doubt as opposed to faith, he is being sucked into the very belief system of those he hates so much - that is what *they* say. In Islam the choice is precisely between those two absolutes, belief and disbelief. Doubt is not concerned - that's a different issue entirely. Of course, the standard agnostic response is to say that whether one believes or disbelieves in matters that are unprovable, either way one is only indulging in supposition and hypothesis. But the fact that something is only a hypothesis does not mean that it isn't true, and it is with regard to the truth of existence that Faith is required. There is a God, or there isn't. There is an Afterlife, or there isn't. These statements may be unprovable and therefore hypothetical, but that doesn't change the fact that they are either true or not, nor the fact that your choice transforms the way you understand your life experience. It requires an act of Faith whatever we decide.

"But wait a moment," says the atheist, "you are the one who says there is a God so you are the one who has to prove it!" Of course you don't have to think about this very long to see that it is illogical, as either statement is unprovable. There is a God. There is No God. It is a positive decision either way. In Arabic, the opposite of "one who believes" is "one who denies". "So why choose either?" says the agnostic. It is to align our life experience with the Truth that we need to decide one way or the other, and as a believer one sees that Creation makes sense, has a purpose and intrinsic justice, in a way that is impossible to see as "one who denies". The choice is ours, we have free will (another statement which requires an act of

faith), and you can even choose to spend your life sitting on the fence, though you should not be surprised if that choice turns out to be rather uncomfortable.

In January 1989 the Observer published an article in which Rushdie compares himself to a character in *Midnight's Children* who "loses his faith and is left with 'a hole inside him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber'". Rushdie says "I too, possess the same God-shaped hole. Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hole with literature". Salman's "God-shaped hole" does not make him an evil person. It just means that he has never been given an understanding of God to fill that hole. This is a tragedy, not just for Rushdie but for all those muslims who, thinking they know all about God and Islam, do not even notice a vacant inner chamber. At least Rushdie is still trying to fill the hole inside him, and may one day discover that literature can never fill a God-shaped hole. Only God can do that!

So if Rushdie is not "one who denies" is he really any more of an apostate than a majority of nominal muslims? Should we decide, like Imam Khomeini, that this man has committed a crime that is unforgivable? Where can he look for compassion and mercy, shelter and protection, now that the lunatics have taken over the asylum? Is it not possible that Rushdie is also Mirza Saeed, the ultimate cynic of the Ayesha Haj, who at the moment of his death opens his heart and "*walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea*" (SV507)?

A mirage

Salman Rushdie is the most skilled writer in the English language ever to have emerged from an Islamic cultural background, and in the novel format he is working in what is one of the West's most liberal platforms for freedom of expression, exceeded perhaps only by Parliament. But his demands for an improbable anarchic society permitting absolute freedom for the writer, with complete disregard for the social effects of overt racism or abuse of minorities, are more easily discussed if one is first prepared to be scrupulously honest and just when looking at what he writes. Here the important thing to remember is that he is using one of the most subtle and modern formats for English prose, and it is really up to native English-speakers to judge the content of what he says, with particular emphasis on intelligent native English-speaking committed muslims who have read the book - and that's me!

I cannot say it often enough or forcefully enough, this "blasphemy" which has caused so much outrage and uproar is not real. It is a mirage, and just as a desert mirage can kill you by leading you away from the water of life, a mirage in the land of agreed fact can destroy you by leading you away from the pure waters of truth and tolerance. What kind of an idea was this novel of Rushdie's? Will it be the one in a hundred that doesn't get smashed to bits but changes the world? It is up to the muslims how they continue in their approach to this affair, whether to admit the possibility that they may have been mistaken or to persist in their statements of "unanimous agreement" and claims of the undeniable merit of the case against the book. Well, this latter argument no longer holds water, as there never was "unanimity" and their case no longer rests on the denunciation of Mr. Rushdie, but in their response to the points I have raised in this essay. Before anyone asks me as an English speaking British muslim to kill anyone on their behalf, I am afraid they will have to come up with some reasons that accord with the principles of the Quran, the example of the Prophet, and the precedent of Islamic Justice, not some mockery of Islamic Law in the name of the Sharia. I think it is time for the muslim world to say to Salman Rushdie "*You got your life back. That's the point!*"

ADDENDA

Reasons for the muslim response

With that I conclude my consideration of the book itself, but before I finish, I would like to deal with a number of related issues, some of which I have touched on in dealing with the book, but which I hope will bear recapping and summarizing, and some others that I feel need mentioning. The first thing to ponder is why, if the book is not really blasphemous, was there such a fierce response.

I hope I have shown that in the Satanic Verses Rushdie is only trying to find an alternative view of religion to the simpleminded understandings of the community into which he was born, and seeking a framework to explore his doubt through the secular understandings amidst which he was educated. He has doubts but is honestly seeking after truth. He has a loathing for hypocrisy, yet a clear love and affection for humankind with all its idiosyncrasies. Although the book is couched in a language unintelligible to the vast majority of the world's muslims, the ideas he expresses in the book are in my opinion no more distant from traditional Islamic teachings than any of the myriad muslim varieties, each sect insisting that they alone are sincere believers and preservers of authentic truth, with all the other 57 varieties consigned to hell-fire, but not condemned to death. Even in Bradford, opposing factions can have mosques side-by-side without open warfare and bloodshed. So why this unbelievable bluster over the not untypical opinions of one man.

Part of the problem is clearly due not just to the difficulty of his language but the impossibility of translating the very modern literary form which he is using. His literary triumphs made him a natural target for those jealous of his success, and the white western non-muslim circles in which he moved left him wide open to accusations of being a Brown Uncle Tom by those who judge that their religious purity and ethnic or national interests are best served by defining themselves in opposition to the non-muslim West, whether the British colonial usurper or the Great Satan USA. So what could be used as a political rallying-cry for the muslim minorities in Britain could also be used as a political distraction in nominally muslim countries. In the event, those who chose to use the book for political purposes showed little concern for the pain of the response of those who followed them, the overwhelming majority of whom would never have even heard of the book if it had been ignored, let alone have been able to read it.

The tip of an iceberg

The outraged response of religious leaders went straight to the heart of the muslim minorities living in the non-muslim west, exacerbating their deepest fears with regard to the effect of the surrounding culture on their children. Their fear of Salman Rushdie is not as an example to, but as an example of their own children, whom they see as rejecting all the cultural and spiritual values that they consider most essential and sacred. With their cultural surroundings so patently out of their control, the tendency is towards its total rejection and withdrawal into an inward looking community pretending that the real world around them just is not there. The alien cultural onslaught on the immigrant can be seen reflected in the muslim world itself, where the cultural imperialism of the west is often overwhelming national and local traditions, not just in the prevalence of western music, films and television programmes, but in such areas as school and university text-books, information and knowledge systems, and economic systems required for international finance.

The inadequacy of the muslim response is a common enough one to a messenger bearing bad news. First kill the messenger then try to destroy the message. But messages aren't destroyed quite as easily as messengers, and burning the book cannot erase its' words from history. In trying to destroy Salman Rushdie those travelling in the ship of Islam are treating him like he is an aeroplane attacking them from the sky, whereas he is more like the tip of an iceberg and the danger comes less from him than what he signifies. Numerous young muslims are rejecting the mindless "traditional" mosque teaching of apparently meaningless words, often forced upon them by means of the cane and systematic brutality. A constant stream leave the madrassah environs every year vowing never to return. And this is just as their fathers did before them, those same fathers who now conform to community pressures by sending their children to the madrassahs. What else can they do to key their children into the spiritual heritage of their culture, vague as that may be, in the tragic absence of any better system. In this situation it is easier to attack Rushdie as the pawn of a western cultural imperialist plot than to face the radical surgery required to stem the haemorrhaging from within.

Similarly it is easier to invent insults to A'isha Umm 'ul Mumineen than to face the fact that pornographic videos of "Aisha" are advertised regularly in Penthouse (usually available from your local muslim newsagent). It is easier to shout down the whore chapters as simple abuse thrown at the Prophet's wives than print extracts that speak of the whores of King's Cross and St.Pancras, *"Swinging handbags, calling out, silver-skirted, wearing fish-net tights; these are not only young goods (average age thirteen to fifteen) but also cheap. They have short, identical histories: all have babies stashed away somewhere, all have been thrown out of their homes by irate, puritanical parents, none of them are white"* (SV459/460), with real life counterparts many of whom are no doubt still bearing the names of the Prophet's wives.

In this muslim community which looks less like Madinah than the Jahilia of "My Beautiful Launderette", it is easier to condemn someone for daring to express doubt than to consider those muslims who with the conviction of certainty feel free to torture prisoners, kill dissenters, export heroin, gas women and children, and commit genocide. How bravely the muslims are marching to fight this mirage which so conveniently distracts them from the enemies of Islam so much closer to their heartlands.

The effect in this country

As a white muslim, usually blending indistinguishably into my surroundings, I am in a better position than most to assess the mood of our non-muslim society. Over the last year, the perception of Islam in the culture into which I was born and in which I live has moved from inquisitive confusion strongly towards uncomprehending revulsion. This affects me and my family personally, but we are better equipped than most to deal with social and intellectual challenges. The greatest damage is being done to young muslims, forbidden to ask questions out of fear that they cannot be answered, and expected to argue an untenable position on behalf of their uncomprehending elders. Young muslims for the most part receive their understanding of Islam through dogmatic instruction devoid of any practical relevance to their lives, and are expected to counter complex and subtle questions with a few standard responses, unrelated to their experience of the real world and little more than muslim myths.

Thus any inquisitive non-muslim who asks questions is likely to end up only more confused and with his ignorance compounded, but this ignorance really does not help the situation. Non-muslims may suspect that the muslims they know do

not strictly conform to the text book definitions, yet are unlikely to know them well enough to know the truth, and are likely to have a thoroughly English reserve when it comes to talking about religion. Indeed the text-book says that muslims pray five times a day, but you might see one in ten at the communal prayer on a Friday, and for many that will be their only prayer of the week. The text book doesn't take into account the prevalence of Births-Marriages-and-Deaths muslims, who have their own tenuous connection with their roots. The muslims' self-definition by what they consider to be their ideals, explains how the imams end up speaking on behalf of a community that largely ignores them, yet to openly speak out against them would be to break the conspiracy of silence. The social consequences of such a move can be seen at its' most brutal in the case of Salman Rushdie.

Unity and unanimity

This self-definition by ideals can also be seen in romantic notions of the perfection of muslim communities far away. You can hear how the muslim world has no crime or injustice, corruption or sexual misconduct, only peace and brotherhood and marriages made in heaven. It does the muslim community no good to posit these insanely ideal scenarios, and we are unlikely to deal with our problems unless we can first admit that they are there. Non-muslims tend to see the muslim world more or less as one homogenised mass, all the same and all conforming (much the same as muslims see the "christian" world), and this dangerous misconception is only reinforced by muslims who thinking we "ought" to be able to speak with one voice suggest that the situation exists. I wonder how many voteless muslims really believe that the foreign ministers of the IOC governments are actually the unified voice of the muslim world and the ultimate Islamic court to decide what can and cannot be printed about Islam. One of the greatest dangers to Islam is not the lack of muslim unanimity, but muslims believing in the myth that it ever existed.

The desire to achieve unity by the elimination of dissent has been justified under the principle of taqlid which is prevalent in many of the Asian community mosques in Britain. Their rejection of personal ijihad means that original thought on an individual basis is actively discouraged, with the inevitable effect that muslims raised and educated in Britain can find the atmosphere of the mosque intolerably oppressive. This alienating effect is not due to differences of colour or even language, but to a difference of culture involving a different approach to the means of understanding life. How many muslims share the sadness that I feel in not being able to go to the local mosque and freely voice the truth as I see it, even when surrounded by pamphlets grotesquely distorting a subject which I am better equipped to judge than the imams. In the name of unity I am expected to submit to the opinions of those who neither speak my language nor understand my culture, although the issue in question is directly related to both. Refusing to lie, yet not wishing to take on the consequences of disturbing the status quo, I take the easy option and simply stay away. In driving myself and others like me away from the mosque, those entrenched in their cultural traditions keep out the very people who are most capable of responding to the questions and spectres raised by Salman Rushdie.

Finding a way out

So what can be done to change things? One important thing is that muslims fluent in the English language, having read this essay should read the book and see if the understandings I have offered are not more valid than the simplistic views expressed so far. It must be recognised that young muslims with A-level English are in a better position to evaluate this novel than their parents. Committed and knowledgeable muslims with some reputation in the community, must be prepared to speak out against the currently permissible opinion, even in the present climate of fear, and say that in the matter of this book we have to admit the possibility of misjudgment. Those who understand must explain it in the mosque to those who don't. It must be made clear that human beings are capable of mistakes, just as were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali, and the Prophet Muhammad himself. This particularly applies to modern religious leaders, so far from the time and place of the Revelation, and especially when they are making decisions about areas of knowledge of which they have minimal qualifications, for example English Literature.

Even if it were not unjustified, it is too late to demand withdrawal of the book. Ban it in India, Africa or wherever, for the good of that society, but not in the English-speaking world. No-one can write in English taking into account the possibility of people tearing phrases out of context, how it will come across in translation, or be understood by the semi-literate. Better to allow it to be printed without let or hindrance, examine the Jahilia passages in schools and mosques and compare them to the truth of the Seerah. Muslim children would rapidly know more about the life and times of the Prophet than they are learning at the moment. Right now, few muslims could even name the wives of the Prophet, let alone discuss the details of their backgrounds, their characters, or more importantly the example for us to be found in the details of the Prophet's relationships with them. Let young muslims, old enough to face the corruption and degeneracy of the society around them, be allowed to consider the similar aspects of the Jahilia into which their religion was born, and ignoring which only diminishes the transforming miracle of Islam. As they face up to mockery from their non-muslim schoolfriends and work associates, let them imagine the derision faced by the Companions, and the manner in which they confronted it and ultimately triumphed.

Media representation

And to the non-muslim powers that be, may I make a plea for a moratorium on the use of the words "Islam" and "Muslim" on the TV news with regard to Governments, political parties, and terrorist factions. On current affairs and opinion programmes let interviewers not allow "experts" to talk of representing Islam but clarify that they are speaking for themselves. Challenge their right to say "Islam says". Call them by ethnic or national or cultural labels. Don't subtitle them with the names of "Islamic organizations". Recognise their variety and their personal interests. The IRA are not called Catholic terrorists, even if they regularly go to mass on Sunday. Columbians are not called Christian drug-runners even if they are financially supporting the local church. Were Ferdinand Marcos or General Noriega ever spoken of as Christian dictators? Was it a specific policy decision that nearly every time we see Saddam Hussein on TV he is shown with his hands raised in prayer, and accompanied by a befezzed Imam? It may help to spread the impression that muslims are a bunch of rapacious thugs, but it also reinforces in the minds of the gullible his claims to be leading the muslims in jihad.

Now that the communist block is losing its' status as the Evil Empire, an enemy is urgently required to explain our need for a "strong defense" industry. In the search for an opponent of a large enough scale to justify our traditional expenditure there is a worrying trend in recent months for this enemy to be imagined as the sixth of the world's population that lives under the banner of Islam. Through the centuries, this cultural polarity has been used to justify human butchery, and with our opinions still shaped by our cultural traditions, from the Crusades to Israel and Palestine, from the Mahound of the middle ages to the villainous oil sheikhs and arab terrorists of movies and TV thrillers, we are none too well equipped to form objective opinions and valid judgements. In the modern world, errors of judgement on such a scale are highly dangerous to all humanity. As we begin the 15th century Hijra and the 21st century AD, may I suggest that the greatest contribution that western politicians and media can make to world peace and harmony is to develop a deeper, more subtle and complex understanding of Islam and the muslim peoples.

Apologies

As a muslim, I have a close enough knowledge of my muslim brothers and sisters to say the things in this essay which I know that in many cases will hurt and confuse. Although I know that what I am saying contains the possibility within it of misinterpretation causing grievous offence, I have felt it necessary to voice them for the sake of Islam and all sincere muslims. But despite all the criticisms I have expressed, I still worship One God and try to follow the example of Muhammad, make five prayers a day, fast in Ramadan, pay my Zakat, and intend some day to make Hajj. I have received all that I know of the Islamic way of life from the most generous, caring, compassionate, affectionate and intelligent people I have ever met, muslims all. I apologise to my muslim family for any pain that I have caused, but I feel it myself, and for the pain that comes from the realisation of truth I have never learned of an anaesthetic, just as "Death's agony comes with Truth - That is what you were trying to escape" (Quran 50.19)

But finally to the muslims, let me say again, we have been attacking a mirage. It is time to recognize the possibility that people have been mistaken and misled. It is time to return to the basic principles of our religion as stated by our Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. It is time to return to Truth and Tolerance.

Now I have finished, and I have done the best I can, and I only hope and pray that I may one day be able to voice such opinions in the mosque without fear for my life and that of my family. I ask forgiveness of God for such mistakes as I have made. The Glory and the Praise belong to God alone.

POST SCRIPT

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